

JENS EDER



CHARACTERS IN FILM AND OTHER MEDIA
THEORY, ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION

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Theory, Analysis, Interpretation

Jens Eder

*Translated by Stephen Lowry
in collaboration with Jens Eder*

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Endorsements

I know of nothing even approaching the scope, detail, and rigor of Jens Eder's magisterial study of character. Its publication in a complete translation finally makes this foundational work available to English-language readers, thereby allowing it to have the impact it merits—alongside works by authors from Aristotle to E. M. Forster and Northrop Frye (or even above the works of these authors, none of whom devoted such learned and plenary attention to character). Eder's book is not only erudite and theoretically astute but deeply illuminating in its interpretations. Moreover, such theoretical insights as his discrimination of four levels of character analysis are developed with such lucidity that I suspect most readers will find their own analyses of character have gained greatly in insight, simply because they have engaged with Eder's book.

Patrick Colm Hogan

Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor at the University of Connecticut

Impressive in scope, depth and precision, Eder's book connects a wide range of fields and approaches to characters. It carefully develops a systematic interdisciplinary framework and offers valuable tools for analysing characters across media and genres. This new English translation will be essential reading for anyone studying characters in media, and I highly recommend it.

Margrethe Bruun Vaage

Associate Professor of Film Studies at Norwegian University of Science and Technology,
Trondheim

In taking the reader on his intelligent, comprehensive, and clearly-written path through the forest of scholarly work on character, Eder has provided an invaluable service. Whether one is interested in the history of research on characters, character analysis, the means of character representation, or the affective and imaginative relations between characters and viewers, this book has much to teach. This impressive book should be required reading for anyone interested not only in fictional characters, but in film and media narrative generally.

Carl Plantinga

Senior Research Fellow, Calvin University

Table of Contents¹

Endorsements	v
Preface to the English Edition	xiii
Acknowledgements	xix
List of Figures	xxiii
List of Diagrams	xxix
List of Tables	xxxii
1. Introduction	1
1.1 The Relationship Between Character, Action, and Plot	4
1.2 Why Character Analysis?	7
1.3 Searching for a Theoretical Foundation	13
1.4 The Structure of the Book	18
PART I: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS (T)	23
2. Research on Characters: An Overview (T)	25
2.1 From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century	27
2.2 Differentiation in the Twentieth Century	29
2.3 Polyphony and Possibilities of Integration in the Early Twenty-First Century	39
2.4 The Current State of Research	42
3. What Are Characters, How Are They Created and Experienced? (T)	51
3.1 Definition and Ontology: What Are Characters?	51
3.2 Communication and Meaning: How Do Characters Originate?	58
3.3 Reception: How Are Characters Understood and Experienced?	67
3.4 Consequences for the Analysis of Characters	91

1 (T) indicates chapters with a primary focus on theoretical groundwork.

PART II: HOW TO ANALYSE CHARACTERS	113
4. A Basic Model for Analysis: The Character Clock	117
4.1 Characters as Represented Beings, Symbols, Symptoms, and Artefacts—and Their Reception	117
4.2 General Kinds of Characters	126
4.3 Expanding the Model: Contexts and Affects	130
4.4 Differentiating the Model: The Specificity and Mediality of Characters	132
4.5 Integrating the Structural Aspects: <i>The Marriage of Maria Braun</i>	136
4.6 Approaching Characters' Realities: <i>Yellow Fever</i>	141
4.7 How to Use the Character Clock	145
4.8 Guidelines for Getting Started: The Most General Questions of Character Analysis	147
PART III: CHARACTERS AS REPRESENTED BEINGS	149
5. Grasping Represented Beings: Forming Mental Models of Characters (T)	155
5.1 Character Models and Their Structure	156
5.2 Factors of Character Reception I: Social Perception and Cognition	174
5.3 Factors of Character Reception II: The Mediality of Characters	199
5.4 Modes of Constructing Character Models: Typification and Individualisation	206
6. Analysing Represented Beings: An Anthropological Heuristic	211
6.1 Overview: Grasping Represented Beings	211
6.2 Corporeality and External Behaviour	225
6.3 Sociality	244
6.4 Psyche: Inner Life and Personality	252
6.5 Overview: Focal Points and Connections of Character Traits	275
6.6 Transformation and Deconstruction of Represented Beings	278
6.7 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions about Characters as Represented Beings	284

PART IV: CHARACTERS AS ARTEFACTS	289
7. Shaping Characters with Cinematic Means: Sensuality and Structure	293
7.1 Cinematic Techniques and the Aesthetics of Characters	293
7.2 The Structure of Character Development: How Information Is Provided	323
7.3 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions about Character Construction	333
8. Characters as Artefacts: Aesthetic Qualities and Conventions	337
8.1 Dimensions of Characters as Artefacts: Realism, Stereotypicality, Complexity, and Other Contested Qualities	337
8.2 Character Conceptions as Conventions of Representation	362
8.3 Conclusion and an Example: Sensory Qualities, Dramatic Composition, and Structures of Characters as Artefacts in <i>Casablanca</i>	377
8.4 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions about Artefact Qualities and Character Conceptions	385
PART V: CHARACTERS IN CONTEXT: MOTIVATION, ACTION, AND CONSTELLATION	387
9. Motivation and Plot: Characters' Needs, Goals, and Actions	391
9.1 Varieties of Motivation	393
9.2 Motivation and Conflict	407
9.3 Motivational Systems, Personality, and Identity	420
9.4 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions about Action and Motivation	423
10. Character Constellations as Social and Aesthetic Systems	427
10.1 Hierarchies of Attention: Main and Secondary Characters	430
10.2 The Orchestration of Characters and Their Traits: Analogies and Contrasts	433
10.3 Functional Relations: Characters' Roles in Narrative and Plot	444
10.4 Conflict Constellations: Protagonists and Antagonists	452
10.5 Interactions, Relationships, and Values: The Character Constellation as a Social System	455
10.6 Overview: Typical Character Constellations in Different Kinds of Films	460
10.7 An Example: The Character Constellation in <i>Casablanca</i>	466
10.8 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions on Character Constellations and Stereotyping	472

PART VI: CHARACTERS AS SYMBOLS AND SYMPTOMS: INTERPRETATION AND IMPACT	477
11. Characters as Symbols:	
How Characters Convey Higher-Level Meanings	489
11.1 Characters and Their Higher-Level Meanings	491
11.2 Characters in Larger Webs of Meaning	496
11.3 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions on Characters as Symbols	499
12. Characters as Symptoms:	
How Characters Interact with Reality	501
12.1 The Causes of Characters	508
12.2 The Uses and Effects of Characters	510
12.3 An Example: Characters as Symbols and Symptoms in <i>Casablanca</i>	521
12.4 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions on Characters as Symptoms	529
PART VII: IMAGINATIVE AND AFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT WITH CHARACTERS	531
13. Imaginative Involvement with Characters: A Matter of Perspective	535
13.1 Current Theories of Involvement with Characters	535
13.2 Perspective, Identification, Empathy: Conceptual Foundations	548
13.3 Perspectives <i>on</i> and <i>with</i> Characters	562
13.4 Identification and Empathy	565
13.5 Cinematic Methods of Shaping Perspectives	570
13.6 Polyphony of Perspectivation: Characters, Narrators, and Filmmakers	579
13.7 Common Perspective Structures in Film	587
13.8 Imaginative Closeness and Distance to Characters	592
13.9 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions on Perspective and Imaginative Closeness	606
14. Affective Involvement with Characters:	
Sympathy, Empathy, and Beyond	609
14.1 A Theoretical Basis: Concepts and Layers of Cinematic Affect	610
14.2 Cues, Dispositions, and Forms of Involvement with Characters	620
14.3 Perspectival Appraisal and Involvement with Represented Beings	624
14.4 Forms, Cues, and Contexts of Affective Involvement	

with Characters: An Overview	645
14.5 Typical Development Patterns of Affective Involvement	650
14.6 An Example: Affective Involvement with Characters in <i>Casablanca</i>	657
14.7 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions on Affective Involvement with Characters	666
PART VIII: A SUMMARY AND A CASE STUDY	669
15. Summary: Fundamentals of Character Theory and Analysis	671
15.1 A Theoretical Basis and a Model for Analysis	671
15.2 How Can Characters Be Understood in Their Different Dimensions? A Conceptual Toolbox	679
15.3 Experiencing Characters: Imaginative Closeness and Affective Involvement	690
15.4 Limitations, Implications, and Applications of the Theory: The Variety of Characters	694
16. A Challenging Case: Characters and the Weight of Reality in <i>Death and the Maiden</i>	701
16.1 Characterisation and Mental Modelling in the Prologue and Exposition	704
16.2 Character Models and Artefact Qualities at the End of the First Act	715
16.3 Affective Involvement with the Characters at the First Plot Point	719
16.4 Conflict Structure, Motivation, and Side-Taking in the Second Act	725
16.5 Perspective Relations and Imaginative Closeness up to the Climax	730
16.6 The Characters' Thematic Meanings at the Film's Ending	737
16.7 The Characters as Artefacts and Their Mediality in Film and Theatre	744
16.8 Symptomatology, Evaluation, and the Weight of Reality	747
Bibliography	755
Filmography	803
Index of Films	817
Index of Topics	821

Preface to the English Edition

Every book about characters has a character itself. This one comes as an immigrant from Central Europe to the Anglo-American language area. No longer young (but let's call it experienced), a little overweight (but let's call it stately), plain, serious, full of good intentions and hoping to be useful, the traveller seeks a conversation with readers. I would be delighted if you were open to this conversation, because this character has had an arduous journey—not a hero's journey, but a long and winding road full of detours. Along the way, the traveller has worked hard, seen a lot and experienced many stories to tell.

My on-again, off-again relationship with this peculiar character is long and complicated. It began a quarter of a century ago with a doctoral project. At the time, I was working in parallel as a media scholar at the University of Hamburg and as a freelance writer and script editor for film and television, so I had both a theoretical and practical interest in characters as well as a deep fascination for them as a viewer and reader. I submitted my dissertation in 2001, but only published it seven years later after a lengthy revision as my then third monograph *Die Figur im Film* (Marburg: Schüren, 2008; 2nd edition, 2014). In all that time, the young Internet offered little access to relevant literature, and today's artificial intelligence (AI) tools were unthinkable (an advantage, I would say, since their current results in the study of characters are still more hallucinatory than inspiring).

My work followed three central motives: I wanted to explore the variety of characters in film and other media, to develop a theoretical basis for understanding them, and to derive approaches for analysing them in practice. Characters spark conflicts in different social contexts and require different forms of analysis. Writers and other media practitioners ask themselves questions of creative analysis: How can a character be designed in order to evoke particular experiences, thoughts and feelings? Media scholars, historians, or theologians undertake interpretative analyses of characters they find interesting or important, because they consider them meaningful, enigmatic, historically revealing, or aesthetically innovative. Sociocultural analyses, again, focus on the causes and effects of characters, for instance in representing social groups, affirming or challenging norms, spreading ideas and affects, ideology and propaganda. Very different things are therefore expected from analyses of characters. Creators want to make them effective; interpreters want to understand them better; cultural critics want to uncover their social roles. Of course, these aims can also be combined.

For any kind of analysis, however, it is of crucial importance to capture the features of characters precisely and to reach agreement about them. To do this, we need a comprehensive theoretical basis and adequate analytical tools. But when I started my research, I found there was a lack of both. Of course, after some time I discovered many outstanding works on characters, for example by Uri Margolin, Thomas Koch, or Murray Smith. Moreover, two literary scholars in Germany, Ralf Schneider and Fotis Jannidis, had begun work on their monographs before I did, and an inspiring exchange developed that years later led to our joint anthology *Characters in Fictional Worlds* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010). I have learned an enormous amount from all these colleagues.

In contrast to existing work, however, my aim was to develop a more general theoretical foundation that would be applicable to characters in different media, genres, and modes of production. This foundation had to be decidedly transdisciplinary in order to link the various strands of character studies and to create a conceptual and argumentative infrastructure that would connect them. In addition to film and media studies, the book therefore integrates findings from literary studies, theatre studies, communication science, art history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology, among others. Finally, a central aim was also to derive concrete categories and practical models for analysing characters in different contexts from the theoretical basis.

Whether I have achieved these aims is for the reader to judge. My own conviction is that the main elements and arguments of the book are still valid after all these years and that it offers a systematic and comprehensive theory of characters. I am, of course, aware of the risks entailed in aiming for comprehensiveness, such as over-complexity, unwieldiness, imprecision, superficiality, lack of focus and depth. Heinrich Heine's mockery of the 'German professor' who tries to force fragmentary life into a system and to 'fill the gaps in the world's construction' 'with his nightcaps and nightgown scraps' has haunted me more than once (Heine 1916: 124). Nevertheless, I am deeply convinced that we need not only piecemeal theories for specific areas, but also attempts at overview and consolidation. After all, when travelling, we need not only detailed maps of individual cities or counties, but also more general maps that show how they are interconnected and how one can get from one to another (it is an advantage of the humanities that they are allowed to draw such maps).

My approach to developing such a transdisciplinary overview was generally pragmatic. I tried to collect as many conceptually clear, argumentatively sound, empirically supported, and practically tested findings from different research perspectives as possible, and to link, compare and evaluate them, also in view of numerous case studies. This could then lead to conclusions about the most consistent conceptual framework and the best possible explanation for the phenomenon in question. In doing so, I have tried to focus on the essential problems of character theory and to eliminate unnecessary pseudo-problems (such as the so-called 'paradox of fiction', the question of why we can have real feelings towards fictional characters).

The greatest difficulty was to condense and structure the overflowing material. From a strategic point of view, it was probably unwise not to follow the advice of colleagues and friends to publish quickly, and instead to embark on such a lengthy revision process. Who can afford to work on a book for so many years these days, especially in the fast-moving world of media studies? However, the feeling that I had not yet done justice to the subject of 'character' and my curiosity about the interesting areas I had touched on left me with no choice. During the writing process, I became acquainted with the joys and sorrows of interdisciplinary work and with a polyphonic inner audience: theorists would probably find my book too imprecise, practitioners too complicated, cineastes too lacking in examples, cultural analysts too uncritical, psychologists too semiotic, semioticians too psychological, and so on. At some point it became clear that I would not be able to fully satisfy all of these inner readers. My project is intended as a joint between different discourses, and as any sportsperson knows, joints are more delicate than what they join. Compromises were inevitable; nevertheless, I hope to have developed a workable basis for character analysis. In writing the text, I have striven for clarity and simplicity, hoping to make my argument more accessible to readers from different backgrounds. Given the choice between a clear, simple formulation and a more intriguing but darker one, I have always opted for the former, aware of the risk that some sophisticated readers might lose interest at these points.

Fortunately, the first and second editions of the book were well received by the German-speaking academic community, and several kind reviewers referred to it as a seminal work. Researchers from a wide range of disciplines—from film and literary studies to communication science, psychology, theology, and games studies—have used my approach. This friendly reception—and the impression that my arguments still seemed fresh some years later—encouraged me to make the book internationally accessible by having it translated into English. But what I naively thought would be a simple undertaking turned out to be quite complicated and time-consuming. Several well-known university presses were interested in publishing the book, but all demanded that it be cut to a third of its original length, which seemed impossible to me. The excessive length also meant that several translators turned down the job or did not finish it. In addition, the technical terminology of the various disciplines and the differences between the languages posed many hurdles. For many German expressions, such as *Anteilnahme* (which can be translated in different contexts as involvement, engagement, interest, sympathy, empathy, or compassion), there was no direct equivalent in English and we had to work with makeshift solutions or paraphrases. Furthermore, many foreign language sources had to be replaced by their English editions or translated where such an edition was not available.

So it was not until fifteen years later that a satisfactory English version was completed, after Stephen Lowry had taken over the translation and I had been able to use suitable software to do the occasional fine-tuning of newly written passages.

In the process, I also became aware of some previously overlooked weaknesses in the book, which I tried to correct as best I could, and made various updates to the content. I am deeply grateful to Stephen and to the many friends, colleagues, and students who have supported and inspired me along the way (many more than I could mention in the acknowledgements below). Now the book is finally here, and I hope readers will find it useful. You will probably sense that it has been written and re-written over many years by an author who has also changed over time. Of course, the concepts, arguments, and examples in this book are shaped by my social identity and individual perspective, with all its limitations and blind spots. Most of the characters mentioned in this book come from the European and American cultural spheres, areas with which I am reasonably familiar. I am very interested in, and often discuss with students, characters from other cultures, or marginalised communities. Precisely because of this, I have often felt that I lacked some of the necessary cultural knowledge and that other scholars could do them more justice. I hope that my work can be useful to them. I am also aware that my knowledge of many of the fields of research to which I refer, such as psychology or sociology, is limited. I was therefore relieved to learn that some of the main building blocks of my theory appear to be supported by recent research in these disciplines. For example, my approach to understanding characters through the formation of mental models seems to resonate with philosopher Albert Newen's Person Model Theory of social cognition (2015) and with psychologist Nurit Tal-Or and her colleagues' (2021) empirical demonstration that the formation of character models is influenced by viewers' knowledge about actors.

A few passages in this book partly overlap with essays that have already been published. Parts of the theory of affective involvement with characters developed in Chapters 13 and 14 can be found in 'Casablanca and the Richness of Emotion' (*Journal of Literary Theory* 1.2 (2007): 231–50), 'Films and Existential Feelings' (*Projections* 10.2 (2016): 75–103), and 'Ways of Being Close to Characters' (*Film Studies* 8 (2006): 68–80). Chapter 15 in this book corresponds in part to the essays 'Understanding Characters' (*Projections* 4.1 (2010): 16–40) and 'Analyzing Characters: Creation, Interpretation, and Cultural Critique' (*Revista de Estudos Literários* 4 (2015): 69–96). However, it is not these essays that form the basis of the passages in the book, but rather the other way round: I reworked parts of the argumentation in my German-language book or PhD thesis into English-language essays. This book presents the parts in their context to international readers for the first time.

In revising the book, I made only minor additions and updates to most chapters, but three aspects required more fundamental changes. First, I no longer define characters exclusively as fictional beings, but more generally as represented beings that can also populate documentaries or other non-fictional works. The specific properties of non-fictional characters could not be discussed in detail, but I have tried to indicate why most of the analytical tools from the book can be applied to them as well. Secondly, I have extended several parts of the book that deal with the different social and

political roles, uses, and effects of characters. Thirdly, I realised that the characters and films covered in the original edition followed too much of an outdated canon that favoured white, male protagonists and directors from the United States and Europe. This shortcoming could not be completely remedied, but I have tried to ensure greater diversity at various points in the book.

I have made the following changes to the individual chapters. Chapters 1 and 5–10 contain only minor changes and remain largely as they were in the original edition. The research review in Chapter 2 has been expanded to include a section on recent work on characters published after 2008. Chapter 3 on the ontology and reception of characters now leads to their definition as represented beings, which can be fictional or non-fictional. In the central Chapter 4, I have included an analysis of Ng'endo Mukii's animated film *Yellow Fever*. The former Chapter 11 on characters as symbols and symptoms has been expanded and divided into two: Chapter 11 now deals only with the interpretation of characters' higher symbolic meanings, Chapter 12 with their symptomatic qualities and their causes and effects in production and reception. Chapters 13 and 14 (formerly 12 and 13) on the imaginative and affective involvement with characters contain selective clarifications and updates, as emotion research has progressed enormously in recent years. The former final chapter has again been divided into two parts: a general summary of the book's main findings (Chapter 15), and a substantially expanded critical analysis of a film that is challenging in many ways, *Death and the Maiden* (Chapter 16). I hope that these revisions have improved the book and that it can hold its own in the eyes of today's international readership.

Acknowledgements

Over the long period of time I have been working on this book, many friends and colleagues have given me advice, inspiration, and support. I would like to thank them all very much. Knowing that I cannot give them all the credit they deserve, I would like to mention at least a few without whom this book would not exist in its present form.

My supervisors Knut Hickethier and Joan Kristin Bleicher at the University of Hamburg offered me helpful suggestions and tolerated the inexorable growth of the text and the passage of time with great patience and kindness. Knut supported me in many other ways during our work together at the University of Hamburg, and his attitude of openness to other disciplines and schools, as well as to social issues and media practice, has greatly influenced my own approach. Also in Hamburg, Hans-Harald Müller and Ludwig Fischer enriched the work with advice on literary theory, encouraged me on many occasions and spurred me on with perceptive comments. Discussions with members of the 'Cognitive Dramaturgy' working group and its generous initiator and host, Hans Jürgen 'James' Wulff, at the University of Kiel were of great value in the drafting phase of the work. Many friendships and professional collaborations developed out of this group. Britta Hartmann, in particular, contributed valuable ideas and encouraging words in our many conversations. Vinzenz Hediger and Christine Noll Brinckmann gave me the opportunity to present preliminary work at the University of Zurich. Corinna Dästner, Eckhard Düsberg, Jörg Herrmann, Matthias Luthardt, and Kathrin Wilkes added perspectives from film practice and public education. Ludger Kaczmarek's bibliographical overviews of film and media studies were of great value. I also owe many insights to the exchange with members and external collaborators of the Hamburg research group 'Narratology', such as Tilmann Köppe and Tom Kindt, and later Simone Winko in our collaboration on the topic of narration and emotion.

Of particular importance to the genesis of this book were in-depth discussions with Fotis Jannidis and Ralf Schneider, who had already made great strides in their own work on literary characters when I had just started my doctorate on characters in film. I would like to thank both for initiating our joint conference at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) at Bielefeld University in 2007, which was also the starting point for our subsequent anthology, *Characters in Fictional Worlds* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010). I am indebted to Jonathan Culpeper, Johan F. Hoorn, Elly A. Konijn,

Dan McIntyre, Katja Mellmann, Maria Elisabeth Reicher, and other contributors for an inspiring exchange, and especially to Murray Smith, who responded to my presentation with helpful feedback. Since then, I have also benefited greatly from Patrick Colm Hogan's excellent publications and many friendly conversations with him. I would also like to thank Uri Margolin and Dolf Zillmann for making their stimulating articles available to me without hesitation.

During my work on the first German-language edition of the book, several readers kindly took the trouble to read parts of the text carefully and critically at various stages and to contribute to its improvement; many thanks to Anne Bartsch, Hannah Birr, Kathrin Fahlenbrach, Britta Hartmann, Henriette Heidbrink, Christian Maintz, and Klaus Sachs-Hombach. I would especially like to thank my former PhD students Maike Reinerth and Jan-Noël Thon, who have long since become distinguished academics in their own right, and whose work I can only recommend. I learnt a lot about digital and transmedia characters in seminars and publications with Jan. Maike not only commented on many chapters and pointed out problems and interesting examples to me later on, but also managed the final editing of the first edition with care and organisational overview.

Annette Schüren was a wonderfully supportive and competent publisher of the German book, and I am grateful for her permission to release the revised English edition with an international press. David Bordwell, Patrick Colm Hogan, and Sarah Mai Dang kindly shared their knowledge of international and online publishing with me. After some searching, I finally came across Open Book Publishers, an academic, non-commercial pioneer in open access publishing. I was delighted to find that the managing director, Alessandra Tosi, was interested in having my book published in its full length, and she guided me through the process with great helpfulness and infinite patience. Later, Adèle Kreager's excellent editing led to numerous improvements in the text. The Open Access publication was financed by VuK - Vernetzungs- und Kompetenzstelle Open Access Brandenburg. I would like to thank Katja Krause, head of the library at the Film University, for putting me in touch with VuK, and the VuK team, particularly Anita Eppelin, Philipp Falkenburg, Katharina Schulz, Heike Stadler, and Anja Zeltner, for their support and once again for their patience.

Before publication, however, there was the translation, which was generously funded by the University of Mannheim and the Film University Babelsberg. Stephen Lowry was an excellent translator. As a former professor of film studies, he had the necessary expertise and, as a native speaker, a feel for the language. With seemingly inexhaustible stamina and concentration, he tackled the overlong text, pointing out inconsistencies and possibilities for shortening, adjusting source references and making countless helpful suggestions, often beyond the linguistic. Without him, this English edition of the book would probably never have been produced, and I owe him a great deal.

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List of Figures

- Fig. 1 The gynoid Ava in *Ex Machina* may serve as an example of the many ways in which characters are experienced and discussed: as persons in a storyworld (not necessarily human); as artefacts (shaped by writing, directing, acting, and visual effects); as carriers of meaning (such as thoughts about artificial intelligence); and as indicators and factors of sociocultural reality (here, for example, concerning the male gaze, gender, and power relations). (Dir. Alex Garland, *Ex Machina*, 2014, Film4/DNA Films, UK/USA. All rights reserved.) p. 23
- Fig. 2 Analysing the characters Maria, Bill, and Hermann in *The Marriage of Maria Braun* raises many difficult questions. (Dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, 1978, Albatros Produktion/Westdeutscher Rundfunk/Trio Film, Germany. All rights reserved.) p. 113
- Fig. 3 The artificial characters Woman and Man from Bardou-Jacquet's music video to Alex Gopher's track 'The Child'. (Dir. Antoine Bardou-Jacquet, Alex Gopher: 'The Child' (Music Video), 1999, Le Village, France. All rights reserved.) p. 127
- Fig. 4 Personified Death (Bernhard Goetzke) and The Wife (Lil Dagover) as symbolic characters in Fritz Lang's *Destiny*. (Dir. Fritz Lang, *Destiny*, 1921, Decla-Bioscop, Germany. All rights reserved.) p. 128
- Fig. 5 Central to the analysis of the characters Charlie Kaufmann (Nicolas Cage) and Susan Orlean (Meryl Streep) in *Adaptation* are their references to eponymous real people: the screenwriter of the film and the author of the adapted book. However, the characters' dimensions as artefacts and symbols are also quite pronounced in this film. (Dir. Spike Jonze, *Adaptation*, 2002, Columbia Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 129
- Fig. 6 The little girl in Ng'endo Mukii's *Yellow Fever* imagines having 'white skin' like the models on television. (Dir. Ng'endoo Mukii, *Yellow Fever*, 2012, Royal College of Art, UK. All rights reserved.) p. 142
- Fig. 7 Rick Blaine's first appearance in *Casablanca* already characterises him in many ways. (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 149
- Fig. 8 *Casablanca*: Rick humiliates Yvonne. (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 190

- Fig. 9 Lassie and her master (Roddy McDowall) in *Lassie Come Home*. (Dir. Fred M. Wilcox, *Lassie Come Home*, 1943, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 221
- Fig. 10 The carnivorous plant, Audrey, is a main character in *The Little Shop of Horrors*—here the poster for Roger Corman’s 1960 movie. (Dir. Roger Corman, *The Little Shop of Horrors*, 1960, The Film Group/Santa Clara Productions, USA) p. 222
- Fig. 11 In *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life*, God discards our round planet Earth in favour of a cubic one. (Dir. Terry Jones, *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life*, 1983, Celandine Films/Python (Monty) Pictures, UK. All rights reserved.) p. 223
- Fig. 12 Research in IT and animation is currently trying to determine the basics of human facial expression and apply them to virtual models. In this example, the expression of a real person was divided into separate areas, and the basic directions of facial movement were recorded and applied to a computer-generated model. (Fidaleo 2008. All rights reserved.) p. 233
- Fig. 13 Cartoons often produce comic effects through exaggerated expressions and gestures, in this case in Tex Avery’s *Red Hot Riding Hood*, which also makes heavy use of national, gender, and age-related stereotypes. (Dir. Tex Avery, *Red Hot Riding Hood*, 1943, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 234
- Fig. 14 The bodily postures and gestures of characters can make their emotions or intentions visible, even from a distance. Here is an overview of expressive postures from Argyle 2004: 205, based on work by Rosenberg and Langer 1965. (All rights reserved.) p. 235
- Fig. 15 Rick Blaine’s expressive face and immaculate attire in *Casablanca*. (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 240
- Fig. 16 Some acting styles can be associated with psychological ideas—for example, Marlon Brando’s method acting in *A Streetcar Named Desire* suggests a psychoanalytic interpretation of the character, emphasising subconscious drives and impulses. (Dir. Elia Kazan, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1951, Warner Bros. Pictures. All rights reserved.) p. 260
- Fig. 17 Rick’s absent gaze during a conversation with Captain Renault in *Casablanca*. (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 270
- Fig. 18 The titular character in Woody Allen’s *Zelig* constantly transforms to fit his environment and profoundly changes his physical, psychological, and social characteristics; here he suddenly becomes corpulent. (Dir. Woody Allen, *Zelig*, 1983, Orion Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 279

- Fig. 19 The transformation of the protagonist into the horrible hybrid Brundlefly in *The Fly*. (Dir. David Cronenberg, *The Fly*, 1986, Brooksfilm/SLM, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 282
- Fig. 20 Daffy Duck being erased by the animator in *Duck Amuck*: a case of narrative metalepsis, pointing to the textual construction of characters. (Dir. Charles M. Jones, *Duck Amuck*, 1953, Warner Bros. Cartoons, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 289
- Fig. 21 In Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*, special camera and lighting techniques are combined with colour grading to reveal rich nuances in facial expressions. (Dir. Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight*, 2016, A24/Plan B Entertainment/Pastel Productions, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 292
- Fig. 22 Characters in animated films (here Princess Fiona in *Shrek*) can be freely moulded, limited only by creativity and technology. Fiona's gestures and facial expressions were modelled on Cameron Diaz's, who also provided her voice. However, despite the quality of the animation, which was touted in marketing the film, the character's smooth, artificial appearance was often criticised. (Dir. Vicky Jenson/Andrew Adamson, *Shrek*, 2001, DreamWorks Animation, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 300
- Fig. 23 Blackface was common in early Hollywood movies: African Americans were played by whites with black greasepaint on their faces, usually in an explicitly defamatory way like here in Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (Walter Long as Gus). (Dir. D. W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*, 1915, David W. Griffith Corp., USA. Public domain.) p. 304
- Fig. 24 Expressionist acting and make-up in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Werner Krauss as Caligari). (Dir. Robert Wiene, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920, Decla-Film, Germany. Public domain.) p. 310
- Fig. 25 Humphrey Bogart wearing platform shoes during the shooting of *Casablanca*. From Propagandakrieg in "Rick's Café 2012. (Associated Press. All rights reserved.) p. 311
- Fig. 26 Make-up can change the appearance and expression of characters in subtle but effective ways. (Illustration from McNeill 1998: 298. All rights reserved.) p. 312
- Fig. 27 The conspicuous clothes of the characters in Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* serve to contrast and characterise them in an ironic way. (Dir. Wes Anderson, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, 2001, Touchstone Pictures/American Empirical Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 313
- Fig. 28 The interplay of various aesthetic factors, such as the composition of the images, makes Maria Braun's helplessness and loneliness palpable after she has heard that her husband will remain in prison. (Dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, 1978, Albatros Filmproduktion/Westdeutscher Rundfunk/Trio Film, Germany. All rights reserved.) p. 322

- Fig. 29 A negative stereotype about Latinos that was common in Hollywood movies for a long time was the evil and stupid 'Bandido' or 'Greaser'; here in *The Gunfighter*. (Dir. Henry King, *The Gunfighter*, 1950, 20th Century Fox, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 345
- Fig. 30 Sandro (Gabriele Ferzetti) and Claudia (Monica Vitti) in Antonioni's *L'avventura* correspond to the character conception of independent realism. (Dir. Michelangelo Antonioni, *L'avventura*, 1960, Cino Del Duca Produzioni/Cinematografiche Europee Société/Cinématographique Lyre, Italy. All rights reserved.) p. 368
- Fig. 31 John Travolta as the gangster Vincent Vega in *Pulp Fiction* invokes the actor's earlier career as singer and dancer. (Dir. Quentin Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction*, 1994, A Band Apart/Jersey Films, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 370
- Fig. 32 The extremely stylised protagonist of Osvaldo Cavandoli's animated series *La Linea*. (Dir. Osvaldo Cavandoli, *La Linea*, 1971–83, B. Del Vita/Telecipo-Belokapi/Wagner-Hallig Film/Quipos srl, Italy. All rights reserved.) p. 375
- Fig. 33 *Casablanca*: after Ilsa Lund's emotional outburst in Rick's apartment, her beauty is emphasised by soft focus, glamour lighting, backlight on her hair, and pinpoint spotlight on her eyes. (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 383
- Fig. 34 The main characters in *Imitation of Life*. From left to right: Annie (Juanita Moore), Lora (Lana Turner), and Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner). (Dir. Douglas Sirk, *Imitation of Life*, 1959, Universal-International, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 387
- Fig. 35 The song and dance scenes in Bollywood movies are motivated less by psychology than by film conventions, but do often refer to the characters' inner feelings metaphorically. In *Main Hoon Na*, an auditorium becomes a dramatic landscape in which a student (Shah Rukh Khan) and his chemistry teacher (Suchmita Sen) dance out their love. (Dir. Farah Khan, *Main Hoon Na*, 2005, Red Chillies Entertainment/Venus Movies, India. All rights reserved.) p. 395
- Fig. 36 In a famous sequence of *Un chien andalou*, a man (Luis Buñuel) slices open the eye of an immobile woman (Simone Mareuil). The surrealist film refuses to give a psychological explanation of its characters' actions, thus leaving us to search for aesthetic, symbolic, or symptomatic answers. (Dir. Luis Buñuel, *Un chien andalou*, 1929, France. Public domain.) p. 395
- Fig. 37 In *Love on the Run*, Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Léaud) is caught between his wife Christine (Claude Jade, on the right) and her friend Liliane (Dani). (Dir. François Truffaut, *Love on the Run*, 1979, Les Films du Carrosse, France. All rights reserved.) p. 418

- Fig. 38 This shot from *I Heart Huckabees* demonstrates how film can show and comment on the complex relationships among characters at various levels simultaneously. The ‘existential detective’ Bernard (Dustin Hoffman, on the right) is trying to convince his reluctant protégé Tommy (Mark Wahlberg) of the New Age truism that everything is connected—and for a moment the characters seem to dissolve and merge on the visual level. (Dir. David O. Russel, *I Heart Huckabees*, 2005, Qwerty Films/Scott Rudin Productions, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 430
- Fig. 39 In the Marseillaise scene in *Casablanca*, all the characters take sides with one of the conflicting groups, as is shown by their positions and posture as well as their singing. (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 470
- Fig. 40 Popular characters can influence a global audience. The cover of the Thai *Today's Women Magazine* (August 2001) shows an Asian model as Lara Croft; the magazine provides advice on how women can use make-up and clothing to resemble various movie characters. p. 477
- Fig. 41 At the beginning of *Citizen Kane*, the dying Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles) utters the enigmatic word ‘Rosebud’. (Dir. Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane*, 1941, RKO Pictures/Mercury Productions, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 490
- Fig. 42 The theatre programme for Harlans antisemitic hate film *Jud Süß* shows Ferdinand Marian in the title role, portrayed as a demonic villain. (Dir. Veit Harlan, *Jud Süß*, Terra Film, 1940, Germany. All rights reserved.) p. 503
- Fig. 43 Many characters refer to real or intertextual models, often several at once, such as the title character of Tex Avery’s *Red Hot Riding Hood*. Her suitor, the Big Bad Wolf, flirts like a stereotypical Frenchman. (Dir. Tex Avery, *Red Hot Riding Hood*, 1943, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 509
- Fig. 44 *Star Wars: Episode I* was often criticised for having its alien characters resemble racist stereotypes. Thus, the greedy, underhanded trader Watto could reinforce antisemitic prejudices. (Dir. George Lucas, *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace*, 1999, Lucasfilm, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 518
- Fig. 45 Use of Rick/Bogart in advertising (here: for a German clothing retailer). (Image courtesy of Mientus Berlin/Humphrey Bogart/Columbiafilm/Interfoto. All rights reserved.) p. 526
- Fig. 46 *Taxi Driver*: towards the end of the film, Travis Bickle, who was celebrated as a hero by the media, looks into the taxi’s rear-view mirror—and into the eyes of the audience. This moment of parasocial interaction suggests that Bickle remains dangerous, and involves the audience in this situation. (Dir. Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver*, 1976, Bill/Phillips Productions/Italo-Judeo Productions, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 531

- Figs. 47–49 Changing visual perspectives during Rick Blaine's first appearance in *Casablanca*. Fig. 47 Rick's signature (POV shot/subjective). Fig. 48 Rick's scrutinising look towards the door (point/glance shot). Fig. 49 The bouncer and the newcomers return Rick's look (point/object shot and eyeline match). (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 574
- Fig. 50 Travis Bickle's subjective view—or memory?—of Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) and her unknown admirer (left, Martin Scorsese in a cameo). (Dir. Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver*, 1976, Bill/Phillips Productions/Italo-Judeo Productions, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 584
- Fig. 51 After the climax of *Taxi Driver*, the conspicuous, distanced, analytical view of the camera on Travis from above is taken up again and shows us the consequences of his development in a long travelling shot: after Travis has unleashed a bloodbath while freeing the child prostitute Iris (Jody Foster), the camera moves back over the slaughter. (Dir. Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver*, 1976, Bill/Phillips Productions/Italo-Judeo Productions, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 586
- Fig. 52 Various features of the Alien trigger the danger schema, such as teeth, claws, slime, size, rapid approach, and an unusual body shape reminiscent of corpses and diverse biological species. (Dir. Ridley Scott, *Alien*, 1979, 20th Century Fox, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 637
- Fig. 53 The farewell scene from *Casablanca*. (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.) p. 662
- Fig. 54 The character configuration in Polanski's drama/thriller *Death and the Maiden*, based on the theatre play of the same name by Ariel Dorfman. (Dir. Roman Polanski, *Death and the Maiden*, 1994, Capitol Films/Channel Four Films, USA/UK/France. All rights reserved.) p. 669
- Fig. 55 The poster for *Death and the Maiden*. (Dir. Roman Polanski, *Death and the Maiden*, 1994, Capitol Films/Channel Four Films, USA/UK/France. All rights reserved.) p. 702
- Fig. 56 and Fig. 57 Introduction of the couple in the prologue of *Death and the Maiden*. (Dir. Roman Polanski, *Death and the Maiden*, 1994, Capitol Films/Channel Four Films, USA/UK/France. All rights reserved.) p. 706
- Fig. 58 Paulina, Gerardo, and Miranda—the antagonistic configuration of the characters after the first plot point. (Dir. Roman Polanski, *Death and the Maiden*, 1994, Capitol Films/Channel Four Films, USA/UK/France. All rights reserved.) p. 725
- Fig. 59 and Fig. 60 Paulina Escobar and Roberto Miranda at the climax of *Death and the Maiden*. (Dir. Roman Polanski, *Death and the Maiden*, 1994, Capitol Films/Channel Four Films, USA/UK/France. All rights reserved.) p. 741
- Fig. 61 Miranda among his family, looking at Paulina, in the epilogue of *Death and the Maiden*. (Dir. Roman Polanski, *Death and the Maiden*, 1994, Capitol Films/Channel Four Films, USA/UK/France. All rights reserved.) p. 742

List of Diagrams

(All diagrams were created by the author, unless otherwise stated.)

Diagram 1	From individual mental representations of a character to the intersubjective character as a social artefact	p. 64
Diagram 2	Levels of film structures and corresponding reception processes	p. 82
Diagram 3	Levels of character reception and their interaction (simplified)	p. 118
Diagram 4	The basic heuristic and analytical model of the Character Clock	p. 124
Diagram 5	Different contexts of characters as represented beings, artefacts, symbols, and symptoms	p. 130
Diagram 6	Different kinds of affective responses to characters as represented beings, artefacts, symbols, and symptoms	p. 132
Diagram 7	Reception of characters as represented (fictional) beings	p. 153
Diagram 8	Corporeality, psyche, sociality, and behaviour as general trait dimensions of represented beings and the main directions of inferring them during reception	p. 164
Diagram 9	Character synthesis and its position in the context of reception	p. 169
Diagram 10	The structure of folk psychology (adapted from Asendorpf 2005: 4, quoting Laucken 1974)	p. 186
Diagram 11	Causal explanation of behaviour according to Bertram Malle (1999: 32)	p. 195
Diagram 12	Factors and elements of character synthesis	p. 219
Diagram 13	Types of represented (fictional) beings	p. 221
Diagram 14	Different aspects of the character as an artefact: aesthetic means, structures, qualities, and conventions	p. 290
Diagram 15	Cinematic devices and levels of characterisation from the perspectives of production and reception	p. 298
Diagram 16	Kinds of typification and their relationships	p. 347

Diagram 17	From individual character synthesis to conventional character conceptions	p. 363
Diagram 18	Different contexts of the individual character as artefact, represented being, symbol, and symptom, and their dominant interrelations	p. 388
Diagram 19	Aspects of motivation and behavioural explanation: characters' traits, situations, and background influence different levels of psychological motivation	p. 397
Diagram 20	Relations between backstory, outer goal, inner need, and key flaw	p. 412
Diagram 21	From needs and goals to conflicts (based on Frensham 1996: 91, referring to Jurgen Wolff)	p. 413
Diagram 22	Motivational conflicts shaping the personality of Truffaut's Antoine Doinel (based on Tomasi 1988: 115)	p. 419
Diagram 23	The orchestration of characters and the constellation of their traits in Sirk's <i>Imitation of Life</i> , focusing on the comparison of Annie (dotted line) and her daughter Sarah Jane (dashed line)	p. 439
Diagram 24	Plot functions and actant roles within the character constellation	p. 449
Diagram 25	The character constellation of <i>Casablanca</i> with a selection of the most important characters and relationships (boxes: major characters; ovals: social groupings; double arrows: conflicts/antagonism; simple lines: support)	p. 467
Diagram 26	The character as a symptom indicating causes and effects in extratextual reality	p. 507
Diagram 27	Imaginative and affective involvement with characters as represented beings	p. 534
Diagram 28	The system of perspectives in narrative films and other media	p. 561
Diagram 29	The audience's dual perspective on the character and the represented situation and its relationship to the character's perspective on the situation	p. 562
Diagram 30	System of imaginative closeness and distance to characters	p. 595
Diagram 31	Affective reactions to characters as represented beings, symbols, symptoms, and artefacts	p. 621
Diagram 32	Nested affective reactions to characters as represented beings, to characters in all their four dimensions, and to entire films or media texts	p. 625
Diagram 33	Forms of affective involvement with characters and their situations in the storyworld	p. 630
Diagram 34	The Character Clock and its central categories	p. 678
Diagram 35	The conflict constellation in the second act of <i>Death and the Maiden</i>	p. 726

List of Tables

Table 1	Levels of film reception and meaning according to different theories	p. 80
Table 2	Objects, data, and methodological starting points of analysing characters and their different modes of reception	p. 99
Table 3	Differences between the approach to character analysis proposed in this book and the usual 'standard approach' (simplified)	p. 101
Table 4	Fundamental structures of character analysis and their equivalents in different theories of film and literary studies	p. 108
Table 5	The field of character analysis, its objects of investigation, and the relations between statements about characters and about reception	p. 111
Table 6	Characters' stable traits and fleeting states in the areas of physicality, psyche, and sociality	p. 213
Table 7	Typical phases of positive and negative character arcs in the course of a narrative (mixed forms with positive developments in one respect and negative in another are also possible)	p. 416
Table 8	Counter character chart of the sitcom <i>Roseanne</i> according to Frensham (1996: 77)	p. 438
Table 9	Typical positions of protagonists, antagonists, and antagonists' helpers within the character constellation	p. 464
Table 10	The matrix of relationships between the mental perspectives of creators, narrators, characters, and recipients, as well as the media (or textual) perspective	p. 559
Table 11	Cinematic cues and mental prerequisites for affective involvement	p. 623
Table 12	Overview of typical cues and kinds of affective involvement with characters	p. 648
Table 13	Kinds of characters	p. 697

1. Introduction

In our shrinking world, where media multiply contacts between more and more people, the number of imagined beings we interact with is also increasing. Like the real population, the imaginary one in our media and minds, in our thoughts and fantasies, is also growing. Characters, products of the human imagination, are omnipresent, and as long as they are not collectively forgotten, they live on forever.

The expressions we use to talk about those represented beings—figures, characters, or personae—originally refer to the human ability to create perceptible forms that stand out from their background. The words ‘figure’ in English, ‘Figur’ in German, or their common etymological source, the Latin ‘figura’, can refer to a wide variety of things, including the bodily shape of a human being, a three-dimensional reproduction of that shape (figurine), a piece in a game (chess figure), a sequence of movements (such as a figure in dance), a geometric form, a rhetorical trope, or a stylistic pattern. All these different meanings share with each other their reference to human creativity and the figure-ground phenomenon: something stands out from a background. The following considerations will concentrate on figures as represented beings—on *characters* or *personae*, recognisable figures imagined to have an inner life. ‘Character’ and the German ‘Charakter’ go back to Ancient Greek ‘χαρακτήρ’, which refers to something carved, to a seal, stamp, or material sign, particularly of an individual personality (Gemoll 1979: 800). So, the term ‘character’ associates the human ability to shape forms with the representation of inner life or personality traits. This also applies to expressions like ‘personnage’ in French or ‘personaggio’ in Italian, which go back to the Latin ‘persona’, referring to an actor’s mask through which their voice resounds (‘per-sonare’). This connection between representing individual minds and creating salient signs will be a central focus of this book: it will examine represented beings as products of human imagination, communication, and performance. In the following, the term ‘character’ will be used because it is most common in the humanities and in everyday talk. However, the contents of this book also apply to ‘media personae’ as the subject of persona studies or research on parasocial interaction (e.g., Konijn and Hoorn 2017; journal *Persona Studies*).

The cultural significance of characters can hardly be overestimated. They serve individual and collective self-understanding, the mediation of images of humanity, of concepts of identity, and of social roles; they enable imaginary exploratory action, the knowledge about alternative modes of being, the development of empathetic

capabilities; they are used for inspiration, entertainment, education, and propaganda. Humans are probably the only animals capable of inventing artificial worlds, from children's role-playing to the production of complex media texts like plays, novels, and films.¹ As humans not only possess imaginative faculties, but also live as social beings, they tend to direct their attention primarily towards those represented entities to which they ascribe processes of consciousness and the ability to act: characters. Narratives and stories are always narratives and stories of somebody, their actions presuppose agents.²

Thus, characters of the most diverse kinds are at the centre of films and other media—Rick Blaine or Jackie Brown, Apu or the Alien, HAL or the Hulk, Sissi or Lassie. They form centres of emotion and identification, function as positive or negative role models, confirm old prejudices or provide new perspectives. The characters of blockbusters or bestsellers may evolve into mythical figures; the provocative or enigmatic characters of independent cinema or experimental art may leave indelible impressions. Characters are a central factor for understanding and experiencing films and their aesthetics and rhetoric. They contribute decisively to their meanings and messages, their affectivity and ideology.

For this reason, characters are important points of reference in the practice of producing, criticising, and analysing films and other media. Film scripts are rejected because viewers cannot identify with the protagonists, or they are accepted because they offer good parts for stars. Script consultants teach 'creating unforgettable characters' (Seger 1990), and great effort goes into casting actors. Numerous characters have become detached from their works of origin and spread transmedially. They live on in sequels or shift from one medium to another: from comic to film (*Black Widow*, *Black Panther*), from film to the stage (*Billy Elliot*) or to computer games (*Alien vs. Predator*), from literature to film (more than half of all the Oscars ever won) and vice versa (the *Indiana Jones* novels). Film characters confront the viewer in dreams and everyday life, as cardboard figures for advertisements, as plastic figurines in merchandising, and as dressed-up impersonators in theme parks. Travelling across media has given popular characters like James Bond or Pippi Longstocking a cultural presence reaching far beyond individual works of origin; they take on a life of their own in the collective memory, independent of the media in which they first appeared (Hügel 1999; Thon 2019).

Characters are thus of decisive importance for the experience and remembrance of films and other artworks; for the thoughts, feelings, and behaviour of viewers and readers; for analysis and criticism; as well as for production and marketing. Theory

1 By 'texts' I mean 'complex but formally bounded, coherent, and (in their totality) communicative, culturally coded semiotic utterances' of any kind in any media (Mosbach 1999: 73).

2 'Narratives' are here understood according to 'fuzzy-set' definitions (Wolf 2002; Ryan 2007): as meaningful representations of stories that prototypically involve characters, a spatio-temporal world, and a causal sequence of events.

and analytical practice, however, have thus far not done justice to this importance of characters. Characters are often assessed in a purely intuitive way or reduced to separate domains: functions in the plot, roles in the script, the performance of stars, experiences of identification, or the discriminatory representation of social groups. What is lacking, however, is a more general perspective that interconnects those domains, in short: a comprehensive theoretical foundation and analytical heuristic. A central concern of this book is therefore to bring together insights from different fields of research and practice in order to develop a systematic basis for the analysis of characters.

This foundation is developed here mostly with a focus on characters in fictional films, with some chapters focusing on their specificity (especially Chapters 7, 12, 13). However, most of what is covered in this book can also be transferred to characters in other media, such as literature, video games, comics, or theatre. Of course, as ‘socially realised structures of communication’ (Gitelman 2006: 7), media are characterised by unique combinations of sensory, semiotic, technological, organisational and practical features and therefore offer specific affordances for the creation, transmission, and storage of texts (Ryan 2005; Meyrowitz 2009). Accordingly, different media also produce different characters. However, many parts of the book deal with general questions that concern all characters, such as: What are characters in the first place, what kinds of properties do they have, and in what ways can they evoke emotions? Many answers to such questions apply to characters in different media, including texts that are non-narrative (like most paintings) or non-fictional (like documentaries). Of course, the findings of this book need to be adapted and specified in all those cases. Fortunately, I can refer here to the work of other researchers who have already done this, for example, focusing on characters in literature (Jannidis 2004; Schneider 2001; Köppe and Kindt 2014), in computer games (Schröter and Thon 2014), or in religious writings (Eisen and Müllner 2016; Eder 2016c).

Of course, attempting a general overview is risky in view of the complexity of the subject matter and the wealth of specialised research. However, my aim is not to develop a ‘grand theory’ but merely to provide a preliminary basis for discussion, an argumentative infrastructure that connects different fields of research and practice in a way that is open to change. The modular, integrative approach of this book means that in trying to constructively connect concepts from different theories, I often have to simplify or modify them slightly. I hope that the result is still convincing on closer examination.

The readers of this book will probably come from very different backgrounds. Some will be more interested in practical analysis, others in theory. I have tried to meet these expectations by structuring the book accordingly, and at the end of this introduction I will give some suggestions on how to use it (also in view of its excess length). Before that, however, some basic premises need to be clarified: What is the purpose of analysing characters in the first place? How can theories help in such an

analysis? What is the current status of these theories? First of all, it must be shown how a focus on characters can be productive for the analysis of films and other media. This is by no means self-evident, as many researchers and practitioners suggest focusing on subjects other than characters. So why should characters deserve their own study?

1.1 The Relationship Between Character, Action, and Plot

When examining films and other media, it often makes sense to focus on their worlds, stories, or aesthetic forms. In all of them, however, it is usually the characters that take centre stage, and these deserve their own consideration. ‘You’ve got to tell us more than what a man did. You’ve got to tell us what he was’, the newspaper editor says to the reporter he assigns to reconstruct the biography and personality of the late Charles Foster Kane (*Citizen Kane*). The same challenge could be given to the theory of literature, theatre, and film, which for a long time has pitted character and plot (story, action) against each other, generally preferring plot and neglecting character.³ While plot structures are a central topic for narrative theory and practice, treated in countless publications, this is by no means true for characters. In structuralism and so-called *actant* models, characters are reduced to their bare functions in the plot (for a critique of this, see Chatman 1978: 108ff.), and more recent models of storytelling also focus mostly on conflict and action. If, however, such perspectives are not supplemented by others that concentrate on characters as such, including their plot-independent properties, essential aspects of a narrative are lost from sight, and the experience of the audience is modelled in a distorted manner. Actions of the plot are experienced by the characters, and they can be co-experienced by recipients if they adopt a character’s perspective. The thematic, moral, and ideological discourse of media texts is also often shaped by attributes of the characters independent of their actions. Especially in cinema, ‘the character has a sort of physical autonomy that makes every action appear subordinated to its precedent existence’ (Bordwell 1992: 13). Nevertheless, since the time of Aristotle, it has been constantly maintained that plot is much more important than character in a narrative (Pfister 1988: 220). This assertion is ambiguous, as long as there is no definition of what is meant by ‘plot’ or ‘course of actions’ (*μῦθος*, *Handlung*). From a broader to an increasingly narrow understanding, these concepts may be understood to include:

1. all events of a narrative including those which are not caused by characters, but by accidents or forces of nature, as well as the events in which characters are not involved at all, such as a sunrise that is perceptible only to the viewers;

3 [Translator’s note] In German, the term ‘Handlung’ refers to the course of actions, which in English would be referred to as plot or story, as well as the various actions of a character—what he or she does—which may also be important in judging their personal motivations, traits, and attributes.

2. the behaviour of characters in its totality along with its consequences and the mental processes of the characters;
3. the *intentional* actions of characters, what they say and do; and finally
4. the *bodily* actions of the characters except for speaking; epitomised in many screenwriting manuals that say a story 'should be told through action rather than dialogue'.

Although the behaviour of characters in the senses (2) to (4) does not encompass all events in a narrative as in sense (1), it will usually include its essential parts: stories are always stories *about somebody* and tell us, as a rule, about the actions of anthropomorphic figures. On the other hand, characters can in principle be represented also without any kind of action, for instance in the form of portraits or descriptions. Minor characters may be characterised without actions of their own, for instance by a physiognomy supposed to indicate their personality. Therefore, at least in certain media or phases of a story, characters may be independent of the plot, whereas the reverse does not apply.

Even if we concentrate on the plot, the dispute about the primacy of action over character does not make any sense: both are interdependent (Pfister 1988: 220; Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 34–36). As early as 1804—long before Henry James's famous statement, 'What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?' (1948: 13)—the novelist Jean Paul noted:

For character and fable presuppose each other in their mutual development as fundamentally as freedom and necessity—like heart and artery—like chicken and egg—and vice versa, because no self can discover itself without a story and no story can exist without a self. (1974: 229)

Less poetically: action—at least in the sense of character behaviour—conceptually presupposes an agent. Moreover, many descriptions of action are already based on assumptions regarding the motives of agents (was a 'killing' premeditated murder or a case of manslaughter?). On the other hand, when all characters are represented without action, we are not dealing with a narrative. Narratives, therefore, demand both character and action (Chatman 1978: 112f.; Pfister 1988: 220). The answer to the question which of the two is more important depends on the particular interests of the analyst and the particular narrative. There are plot-oriented action films, character-oriented films like *Citizen Kane*, and films in which neither characters nor actions occupy the foreground, but rather the process of narration itself (*L'Année dernière à Marienbad*).

Against this background, Aristotle's well-known *Poetics* passages may be read not as statements about the primacy of character or plot (*mythos*) in narratives in general but rather as a genre-specific plea for plot-oriented tragedies. With regard to the character, Aristotle distinguishes between the character as agent (*prattōn*; i.e., a precursor of the structuralist 'actant') and the character's moral personality traits

(*ethos*). For the action of a drama—according to his thesis—we do indeed need agents, but no explicit portrayal of their personality for its own sake. In this sense, for Aristotle the plot assumes priority over the depiction of characters (1902).

A plot-focused position in poetics can also be seen in the principle of dramaturgical necessity, which is still advocated by many contemporary writing manuals. They advise that all the elements of a narrative that do not advance the development of the action should be scrapped—e.g., scenes which delve into a character's inner life without driving the plot forward. Vice versa, Lajos Egri demands that all the actions of a character must be derivable from the interplay of the character's traits and given situations (1960: 58f.). Similarly, Robert McKee formulates: 'We cannot ask which is more important, [plot] structure or character, because structure *is* character; character *is* structure' (1997: 100). The true moral personality of a character, he claims, shows itself only in the decisions which the character makes when under pressure to act (101). He strictly separates this from 'characterisation' in the sense of all represented and perceived properties of a character: 'the sum of all observable qualities of a human being, everything knowable through careful scrutiny' (100). Accordingly, even when a character has further properties, the essential core of its personality is determined by its actions.

The principle of dramaturgical necessity, however, applies only to certain kinds of narrative, and even there its validity is limited. It merely represents a rule of thumb that counteracts tendencies in the process of production, where characters frequently appear to encroach upon a space disproportionately larger than their function in the action. This expansive tendency of characters—which actually underlines their importance to human imagination—must then be counteracted in order to safeguard the composition and the specific purposes of the narrative. The primacy of action or character can thus only be formulated normatively against the background of culturally and historically contingent and often media-specific intended effects (e.g., entertainment vs understanding the human psyche). While there are primarily plot-oriented narratives, there are also clearly character-oriented ones. For many authors like Jean Paul, for instance, characters enjoy priority over the plot:

An occurrence gains substance only through a self, i.e. through this self's character; in a deserted world without minds there can be no destiny and no history. Only with humans can freedom and world unfold with their twofold attraction. This self lends so much more to occurrences than vice versa, that it can elevate the smallest among them, as is proved by the stories of villages and scholars. (Jean Paul 1974: 230)

The relationship between character and action also depends on the affordances of different media. Actions in film and drama are usually performed by visible agents, whose body images and sounds have a strong physical and performative presence beyond mere plot functions: they immediately appear as old or young, ugly or beautiful, or carry out actions skilfully or awkwardly. The effect of that is obvious in body-

centred genres (like horror or pornography; Williams 1991). But also in psychological dramas and other genres, the viewers' interests are often concentrated on qualities of the characters revealed independent of the depicted actions. Body images and voices will allow viewers to infer many additional character traits; it will make a difference to their involvement and the plausibility of the story if a certain character is portrayed by Kristen Stewart or Awkwafina, John Goodman or Timothée Chalamet.

Further arguments speak for the necessity of focusing on characters. They can be remembered independently of the plot and are often remembered better than it. In television series, they occupy permanent positions in character constellations that exist beyond the plots of individual episodes and evoke lasting sympathies, antipathies, or parasocial relationships in the viewer. The star images of actors such as Marilyn Monroe are closely associated with specific characters (Dyer 1999; Lowry and Korte 2000). And independently of specific plots, popular characters like Donald Duck can be transferred between different texts and media.

In short, the general claim of a primacy of plot over characters is wrong. And although characters are embedded in other larger structures, such as narrative worlds or aesthetic forms, they can also detach themselves from such structures and circulate across different texts, worlds and styles. They are objects of attention in their own right, and there are good reasons to focus on them more systematically in the theory, analysis and interpretation of narratives and other works of art. The study of characters is by no means supposed to replace the exploration of aesthetic forms and styles, or of narrative worlds, stories, and themes, but it is a necessary complement. Yet what purposes does character analysis actually serve?

1.2 Why Character Analysis?

Characters may puzzle viewers in many ways. That characters function at all is already enigmatic enough—why can we 'treat a series of textual signs like a living person' (Jannidis 2000: 5), and what is it that makes many of them so easily comprehensible? Moreover, many other characters are by no means easy to understand: Why does Ben in *Leaving Las Vegas* drink himself to death? What is going on inside Alma and Elisabeth in *Persona*? A lack of explicit explanations challenges us to seek out the motives and the personalities of such characters, to explore their innermost lives. Surrealist films like *L'Âge d'or* or narrative experiments like *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* go even further than this and not only refuse psychological explanation, but dissolve the identity of their characters, irritate narrative conventions, and challenge images of humanity. One of the fundamental functions of artworks and their characters is that they represent alternative ways of being and new perspectives on humans and other creatures, which are often not immediately comprehensible.

Since characters are of such central importance to the reception and interpretation of artworks, they may not only offer enigmas but also trigger controversies. How

should one respond to the consumerist heroines of *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), or to the gutter philosopher and rapist Johnny in *Naked*? Questions of this sort are tricky, and they arouse disputes among viewers and filmmakers: authors may think their characters are sympathetic and realistic—but the producers insist on revisions.

The most impassioned character-related conflicts are commonly stirred up by questions of whether certain characters convey distorted images of humanity, disparage social groups, or are exploited as ideological instruments. Race, class, gender, (dis)ability, religion, sexual orientation, and political attitude are among the most conflict-laden and widely discussed aspects of characters. The Nazi film-director Veit Harlan was taken to court after the War for the antisemitic portrayals in his propagandistic historical film *Jud Süß*. The indictment against him ran as follows: crimes against humanity and psychological abetment of the Holocaust. Several decades later, some extraterrestrials in *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace* strike many critics as thinly veiled racist and antisemitic stereotypes.⁴ Media content is rife with racist, sexist, classist, and other defamatory representations that urgently require well-founded discussion and criticism.

In order to substantiate critiques, settle conflicts, or decipher enigmatic characters, precise and substantiated analyses are indispensable. Such analyses are carried out in diverse contexts:

- During the production of films and other media texts, for instance when developing scripts or directing actors, questions of *practice-led or creative analysis* arise, that concern how particular effects on an audience might be achieved by a character. Here, media works are regarded as constructs whose artistic or economic success depends crucially on their characters.⁵
- When, by contrast, viewers, critics, and scholars seek to comprehend films, questions of an *interpretative analysis* pose themselves. How can the enigmatic behaviour, the intense allure or the complex symbolism of a character be explained? What aesthetic means and strategies are used to shape the character, and what does it contribute to the meaning and experience of a work? In this context, the focus is generally on multi-layered, unusual characters and films as works of art.⁶
- *Sociocultural analyses* concern themselves primarily with the representation

4 For *Jud Süß* and the process against Harlan, see the docudrama *Jud Süß: Ein Film als Verbrechen?* dir. Horst Königstein and Joachim Lange (Germany, 2001). For *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace*, see Hubbard 2003.

5 Such analyses, which have their ancestry in Aristotle's *Poetics*, are documented, on the one hand, by numerous interviews with, and monographs on, writers, producers, directors, and actors (as in Truffaut's interviews with Hitchcock 1966), and on the other hand in advisory literature (e.g., Seger 1990).

6 In such cases, the analysis of particular characters is usually part of the interpretation of films, which may be encountered in viewers' conversations, newspaper reviews, auteur monographs, genre surveys, or other related publications.

of humans in general or of particular social groups—as categorized by ethnicity, class, gender, age, etc.—and examine the communicative power or impact of characters, their social potentials, causes, and effects. In what ways are women and men, children and the elderly, labourers and doctors, white people and people of colour represented? Another focus is on trends concerning certain kinds of characters: What does the abundance of androids in contemporary narratives tell us? In addition, specific traits or aspects of characters, such as evilness, beauty, or agency, may also be the object of cultural analysis. In all these cases, it is usually popular or otherwise influential films and characters that are dealt with.⁷

These three focal points of character analysis—artistic practice, aesthetic interpretation, and sociocultural critique—are often connected with value judgements: characters are evaluated according to their dramaturgical suitability, their aesthetic originality, or their social impact. Frequently, a historical perspective enlarges the analysis with a diachronic and intertextual dimension: How can I, as a scriptwriter, do better this time than I did with my earlier characters? What characters from older films are alluded to in this recent one? How has the image of women developed in Hollywood cinema?

During analysis, the concentration may thus be on particular characters in concrete works, or on specific types and aspects of characters. The process of analysis, as a rule, follows certain steps: one watches the film or reads the script several times, concentrates on the aspects relating to characters, and supplements the resulting impressions with additional information, e.g., about viewers or historical contexts. On this basis, one formulates statements about the characters and those aspects of the work relevant to them (perhaps adding a discussion of selected scenes or images). These statements should be rationally argued and supported, so as to stand up to critical questioning, since such an analysis can serve the exchange of controversial views, eliminate misunderstandings, and render diverging audience reactions comprehensible.

The process of analysis therefore involves typical tasks and problems. It raises the questions of how to select relevant observations and information (heuristics), how to express these observations adequately (categorisation, verbalisation, complexity reduction) and which justifications should be valid for analytical statements about characters. The analysis requires the simplification of what is too complex and the linguistic representation of what is non-linguistic; both operations presuppose categories for the description of at least three domains: the text, the represented beings, and their reception. In addition, character traits that are only conveyed audiovisually or implicitly must also be identified and described. As most of the characters,

⁷ The international literature on the depiction of gender, sexual orientation, disability, people of colour, and other social groups is extensive; the bandwidth of approaches ranges from empirical studies (e.g., Nitsche 2000; Holtzman and Sharpe 2014; Linke and Prommer 2021) to interpretive and cultural approaches (e.g., Hissnauer and Klein 2002; Benshoff and Griffin 2004).

moreover, exhibit an immeasurable range of traits, one must limit their description to those which are of the greatest relevance, because ‘what we call “descriptions”, are instruments for particular applications’ (Wittgenstein 1989: 372f.). For these reasons we create different descriptions of characters for different purposes. Some of them are highly condensed. Film titles often characterise the protagonists in a few words (e.g., *The Hucksters*); and criticism, reviews, and serial bibles are full of short descriptions of characters. Seth Godin’s *Encyclopedia of Fictional People* is made up exclusively of such condensed characterisations, for instance:

Lund, Ilsa: An almost ethereal presence whose courage, beauty, and romantic allure capture the hearts of many men. Loyal wife to freedom fighter Victor Laszlo, though she was once involved with Rick Blaine [...] (1996: 176)

The reconstruction of star images in film studies derives generalisations from the characters embodied by the stars, for example in the case of Hanna Schygulla, the image of the ‘Marilyn of Suburbia’:

On the one hand, the role is that of a character dependent on the male, preoccupied with external appearance, and presenting herself as a sexual object, but then it also shows another, deeper side: the innocent-naïve girl that insists on, and keeps hoping for, the fulfilment of happiness, and that embodies the ‘principle of desire’ [...] (Lowry and Korte 2000: 225)

Characterisations of this sort are the result of double processes of interpretation. On the one hand, an idea of a character is formed and a system of traits is inferred from the images and the sounds of the film. On the other hand, this fleeting mental construct is converted into a few lines of language, such conversion being necessarily dependent upon categorisation, weighting, selection, semantic reduction, metaphor, and imaginative compression, all influenced by stereotypes and biases. The accurate description of a character requires skill. The essential point is to find the key to the character, to identify traits that are particularly important and imply further characteristics. The system of traits making up a character is nearly always more complex. The short examples quoted above clearly show that only a few aspects of characterisation are actually taken into consideration. For Ilsa Lund from *Casablanca*, for instance, the areas of external appearance, moral character, basic emotional attitudes, and certain social relations are touched upon (from a clearly gendered perspective), whereas other kinds of traits are not mentioned at all (e.g., age, intelligence, abilities).

Numerous different factors seem to determine which traits appear relevant enough to be included in the description of a character. One of the most important criteria will certainly be the intensity with which the characters and their properties are presented in the text, including how they are introduced, whether they behave in ways that suggest certain traits, whether the sequences in question are particularly impressive or

stand out because of contrasts and analogies, or whether they deviate from aesthetic conventions. Other criteria include the position of the characters in their overall constellation, in the narrative, or in the thematic structure.

Now, the analysis of characters does not only aim at relevant descriptions of characters, but usually also at thick descriptions in the sense of Clifford Geertz (2000, referring to Gilbert Ryle). A 'thin' description limits itself to the externally visible, physical aspects of a cultural phenomenon, such as the external appearance or behaviour of human beings. A 'thick' description, however, offers an interpretation of this phenomenon that takes into account its mental and social aspects, for instance its personal intentions or cultural contexts. In a thin description one might, for example, state no more than that someone moves their eyelids rapidly, whereas a thick description would state explicitly whether those movements were involuntary twitching or purposive blinking with a specific social meaning. Thick descriptions are often shorter than thin ones: How would one describe 'the poise of a trained dancer' in all its external details? And often thick descriptions are controversial, as is demonstrated by related legal disputes: was the fatal shot at someone else a mistake, an act of manslaughter, or an act of murder?

Because describing and analysing characters involves such complex, presupposition-rich tasks, we must rely on intuition and ordinary language to a certain extent. However, in order to grasp other persons' experiences, make new observations or substantiate a particular thesis, we need to go beyond mere intuition, and a systematic, theory-based approach and clearly defined terminology become essential prerequisites. Thus, when analysing characters, we are faced with several fundamental questions: What is the scope of character analysis? What are characters? How do they originate? How can we substantiate statements about them? How can they be analysed systematically? Which categories, structural models, and procedures can be used? What assumptions can we rely on? How do audiences perceive and respond to characters?

Supplying answers to such questions is an essential objective of the theory of characters. As the saying goes, nothing is as practical as a good theory. Theories provide the foundation for a systematic and transparent analysis. They help its heuristics by describing general structures of the object under investigation and by singling out those aspects of a character which should be investigated. In this way, they define points of relevance, draw attention to neglected aspects, and call certain other areas into question (should one analyse characters' minds or rather the textual devices that represent them?). Theories of characters clarify methodological questions and make suggestions as to the means, categories, and models (for instance, psychological or semiotic ones) through which characters ought to be analysed. The clarification of fundamental concepts and forms of argumentation offers, finally, a basis for the analysis that makes clear under what circumstances statements about characters can be accepted as correct or justified. The theory of characters thus places their analysis on a conceptual and methodological footing, develops useful categories and heuristics, and makes it possible to link and compare single analyses, expanding their particular perspectives. It offers a toolbox—a consistent set of concepts, definitions, models,

and methods that can be applied in analysis and empirical investigations.⁸

The understanding and interpretation of particular characters is highly dependent on culturally, historically and individually variable contexts, images of humanity, conceptions of personality, and conventions of representation. But the kind of theory I am aiming for here is supra-historical and trans-generic; it focuses on general structures that apply to characters of different media, periods, and genres. It aims to develop a set of analytical tools that can be applied to all kinds of characters, making it possible to compare them and to describe their historical and cultural diversity. Of course, the structures, determining factors, and causal relationships of this general theory must be specified when applied to different works, media, genres, and periods. But only a consistent theoretical basis can ensure that the distinctive features of an individual character can be reliably identified, precisely described, and compared with those of other characters. It is therefore essential that forms of character analysis be firmly grounded in theory if they are to go beyond mere intuition and attempt to be systematic and nuanced, methodologically sound, and transparent in their argumentation.

Clearly, the significance of a theory of characters is not limited to its role in analysis. It also contributes to more abstract forms of knowledge. It may also help deal with the most puzzling thing about characters: the fact that audiences treat characters like real beings in many respects, that they try to understand their personalities and their actions, that they react to them emotionally and behaviourally—even to the point of sending letters to fictitious television protagonists.

This book aims primarily at improving the analysis of characters, however. The reason is that, so far, methodical procedures have barely been developed here. Anybody who intends to investigate characters finds themselves forced to fall back on their intuitions. Most of the textbooks for film analysis still consider characters as a rather marginal aspect and limit themselves to fragmentary observations.⁹ None is able to offer a set of instruments that would come anywhere near the differentiated categories worked out for dealing with plot structures or audiovisual style. One reason for this is certainly the state of research: the development of systematic, analysis-oriented theories of characters has not yet progressed very far, as the following overview will show.

8 This is related to David Bordwell's concept of a 'poetics' (1989: 273): of a conceptual frame and an analytical set of instruments for dealing with questions concerning the composition and the effects of artworks and their elements. An alternative approach to a comprehensive theory or poetics of characters would be a sort of piecemeal theorising, i.e., the selection of specific theories for specific tasks. Even such piecemeal theorising would require, however, at least a general survey of the theoretical elements that are available at all and their interrelations; moreover, it involves a high risk of argumentative inconsistencies.

9 For instance, in David Bordwell's and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction* (2001), characters are mentioned only in passing as causal factors of the story and as instances creating particular perspectives.

1.3 Searching for a Theoretical Foundation

The theory of characters can look back on a history of more than two thousand years and encompasses an impressive spectrum of themes.¹⁰ In many respects, however, it is still at an early stage, as Chapter 2 will demonstrate in more detail.¹¹ At this point, I will just identify some of the greatest gaps and problems in theorising by comparing the present state-of-affairs with an ideal state. What questions should a theory of characters ideally address, and what standards of quality should it meet? Seven steps in the construction of an appropriate theory may be distinguished (drawing on Margolin 1990: 843f.):

1. In a first step, the subject matter 'character' and its most important aspects have to be *defined* and delimited as precisely as possible. The prime aim here is to specify what characters actually are and what ontological status they have. The answer to these questions has important consequences: if I understand characters as mimetic analogues of human beings, then I shall primarily investigate their psychological or social properties; if I take them to be constellations of signs, then I concentrate on the structures of the text in which they appear. In theoretical discourse, such positions have often been irreconcilably opposed to each other.
2. Once the object of investigation has been defined, one can ask what determines its *constitution* and formation. How do characters arise, and what factors are involved? Through what means of characterisation are they created? How are the identity and the continuity of a character ensured or disrupted? Many investigations have already been carried out in regard to this complex of questions, but, as I shall show later on, the role of the recipients has generally not been sufficiently considered.
3. A core area of the theory of characters involves determining their fundamental *dimensions* and structures. What aspects of characters need to be differentiated (e.g., physical features, personality, social role)? How are their traits and dimensions interrelated? In what ways can characters change? Theory has thus far been underdeveloped in regard to these questions, which are of central importance to analysis. It has essentially remained limited to 'actant models', which reduce characters to their

10 'Theory' is understood here in a broad sense: as the methodical, argumentatively structured reflection of a topic, which intends to clarify conceptual relations and work out general law-like regularities. It has repeatedly been noted that the character has definitely been neglected by theory, e.g., in Chatman 1978: 107; Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 29; Michaels 1998: xiii; Tröhler et al. 1997: 9; Frow 1986: 227; Schlobin 2003.

11 A brief rundown of character-related research within film studies can also be found in Tröhler 2007; relevant research within literary studies is surveyed in Koch 1991 and Jannidis 2004. I have been unable to find research surveys in the fields of theatre studies or in the history and theory of the fine arts.

functions in driving the plot, and there are few structural models on a 'middle plane' of theory formation between such abstract plot functions and concrete individual characters (Stückrath 1992: 107). Thus, the question of how one can adequately describe characters as represented persons and artificial constructs remains largely unanswered.

4. On the basis of the preceding steps, hypotheses about the *relationships* between characters and other elements of media texts may be formulated. Research has thus far foregrounded the relationships between characters and action/plot or between characters and narrators. Other important issues, however, were rarely dealt with, such as character constellations or connections between characters and thematic meanings.
5. Woven into the stages of theory-development as outlined so far is the question of the *reception* of characters, their sensory, cognitive and affective experience: How do viewers perceive characters, how do they engage with them or become involved with them? How can characters sometimes be treated like real persons and sometimes quite differently? Why are certain characters fascinating or boring? In what ways do they evoke affects and emotions? Psychoanalytical, semiotic, and cognitive theories suggest very different answers to such questions.
6. Wider-reaching approaches are concerned with the connections between character, *culture*, and history: How does the sociocultural environment influence the emergence of characters? How do characters affect culture and society? What images of humanity are revealed in them, and what is their relation to social groups? With regard to these questions, many theses, often far-reaching ones, have been advanced; they range from the mirroring of given real conditions to manipulating people's behaviour. Only rarely, however, are such theses based on a careful examination of the questions formulated earlier. They usually start out from intuitive presuppositions or from theories developed in other areas.
7. *Typologies* make it easier to gain a more comprehensive view of each of the previous levels: What types of characters dominate particular historical phases? What characters are typical of genres or stylistic groups, like the cowboy for the Western or the femme fatale for the film noir? What do the characters within the oeuvre of some author or director have in common? What can be said about larger-scale types of characters, for instance the fragile characters of modernist films (Michaels 1998)? Constructing typologies has been one of the primary activities of the study of characters so far.¹² However, as mentioned before, this also has often lacked an appropriate foundation.

¹² These are predominately typologies dealing with the representation of social groups; in addition, genre typologies are common, e.g., relating to characters in horror films (Rasmussen 1998).

These seven sets of questions certainly do not cover the whole field of character theory, but they do reveal some essential steps and gaps in the construction of such a theory.¹³ To my knowledge, there is still no theory that tackles all seven themes systematically and in detail. While there are many treatments of selected aspects, comprehensive theoretical approaches remain rare. Although all the above topics are intimately connected with each other, there has so far been no attempt to deal with them all in their systematic interconnections. This would, however, be the prerequisite for developing a consistent basis for the analysis of characters.

Moreover, there is no consensus in any of the seven theoretical domains. If discussions take place at all, they are highly controversial, and very heterogeneous positions have evolved. By way of ideal-typical generalisation, four theoretical approaches with different focal areas and methodological foundations can be singled out (presented in greater detail in Chapter 2).

The oldest approaches stem from the school of *hermeneutics*. They understand characters primarily as images of human beings, investigate their connections with historical and cultural contexts, and develop typologies. Emphasising the historical background of characters and their creators, they largely neglect fundamental questions of the ontology, constitution, and reception of characters. Often, hermeneutical analyses are guided more by intuition than by a theory.

Psychoanalytical positions generally presuppose a far-reaching analogy between characters and human beings. Their central area of interest is the psyche of the characters, their creators, or their recipients. Often, they complement an essentially hermeneutical approach with psychoanalytical models of personality in order to explain the internal life of characters, on the one hand, and the reactions of the viewers or readers, on the other. Certain positions, such as that of Carl Gustav Jung (1964), take characters to be the symbolic expression of psychological processes on a collective scale. The fundamental questions of the ontology and the textual constitution of characters are paid only scant attention by approaches deriving from psychoanalysis.

Semiotic and (post-)structuralist approaches have been developed since the 1960s as movements to counteract hermeneutics and psychoanalysis, and they have remained dominant for several decades. They emphatically stress the differences between characters and real beings and concentrate on questions of the constitution of characters, making the media text their central object of attention. They describe the formation of characters with the help of semiotic models, and often even the characters themselves are considered to be nothing but complexes of signs or textual structures. The consequence is, however, that central features of characters, such as their personality, as well as the experiences of their audiences are mostly excluded,

13 Empirical research on the character—in Margolin's model the fifth and last step—can, in my view, be carried out adequately only after theory has worked out a structured set of concepts and a selection of hypotheses to guide investigations. Cf. however the work by Johan van Hoorn and Elly Konijn, e.g., 2003.

and that the connections of characters with meaning and culture are only sketched out in abstract and reductive ways.

Since the 1980s, *cognitive theories* of the character have developed. They model the—not only cognitive but also perceptual and affective—experiences of viewers or readers on the basis of the cognitive sciences, especially philosophy of mind and empirical psychology. Characters are conceived here as text-based constructs of the mind, whose analysis requires models of the human psyche and text comprehension. Cognitive models of the media text differ from semiotic approaches in that they focus more on the interrelation between text and reception. And cognitive models of the psyche differ from psychoanalysis by more detailed accounts of basic mental processes as well as by stricter conceptual and empirical criteria. However, cognitive theories have so far mostly concentrated on the relationship between character and individual reception and neglected the level of culture and society.

These dominant theoretical approaches not only differ considerably in their basic assumptions and methods, but also in their focal areas. A dialogue between the approaches is urgently needed, since each of them has produced interesting results in its own area, but at the same time has revealed extensive blind spots. As a result, the above questions concerning the definition, constitution, structure, relationships, reception, cultural contexts, and types of characters have thus been neither comprehensively nor systematically addressed, and character theory is fragmented into a disordered assortment of isolated pieces of knowledge, particularistic perspectives, and rival positions. Altogether, across disciplines there is a lack of comprehensive monographs, research surveys or handbook entries dealing with characters in general. However, at least a few pioneering contributions to the theory of characters have been published during the last years in different disciplines and languages (see Chapter 2).¹⁴ For this reason, it is advisable to approach character theory from a transdisciplinary and international perspective right from the start.

The extant problematical situation of research is essentially the effect of four different causes: the apparent self-evidence of characters; the factual complexity of the subject matter; the necessity of a trans- or interdisciplinary approach; and the ambivalence of the very concept of character. To many it has seemed unnecessary to engage theoretically with characters because of the pervasive feeling that characters are, as it were, 'self-explanatory' and that any kind of theory could, therefore, produce nothing but trivia. In what follows, however, I will show why ordinary intuition is often insufficient to tackle the forms and effects of characters and to achieve mutual understanding with regard to differing conceptions of characters. On the contrary, the subject is in fact highly complex and multi-faceted, and most of its aspects demand an interdisciplinary approach. Questions, for instance, of the definition, textual

14 Among the comprehensive conceptions of the study of film, Smith 1995 and Tomasi 1988 must be considered outstanding; for French work cf. the survey given by Blüher 1999. For the study of literature, Koch 1991, Nieragden 1995, Schneider 2000, and Jannidis 2004 may be mentioned.

construction, and reception of characters can only be answered properly by taking recourse to philosophy, semiotics, sociology, and psychology. If one intends to focus on the connections between character and culture or on structural models of personality and corporeality, then the resulting problems are even more disturbing: as characters cover the domain of the representation of human beings, all the scholarly fields that study human beings may claim to be relevant (see also Frow 1986). The essential questions faced by human beings revolve around human beings, and characters as images and representations of human beings inherit a good deal of these questions. But the spectrum of characters includes not only human-like characters but also zoomorphic and artificial characters: animals, cyborgs, monsters, creatures inhabiting the border areas of what is considered possible and areas beyond these borders. Besides, characters not only serve to represent human realities as they are at some given time; they also serve to project alternatives and to explore the spheres of the potentially conceivable. For a theory of characters, therefore, the unavoidable question poses itself: To what extent and purpose can and should one, when attempting to describe characters, fall back on certain disciplines? How can one present all the detailed aspects of the character in their systematic interrelations and still sensibly handle the inevitably emerging thematic and disciplinary complexity?

These central problems of the subject are intimately associated with equally fundamental problems of methodology. It is only too well known that trans- and interdisciplinary approaches court the dangers of theoretical inconsistency, superficiality, and tedious clumsiness. As best I could, I tried to deal with that and reduce the first two of these dangers in the following way: I based my argument on theories from the fields of research I'm most familiar with: film and media studies, literary studies, and philosophy. From other disciplines, whose basic features I know reasonably well, such as cultural studies, communication science, and linguistics, I have consulted subject-specific research. In any other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology, I have drawn less on current research literature and more on widely used handbooks that summarise the generally accepted state of research in a concise form. This approach certainly offers much room for criticism, but I hope that my argumentation will nevertheless convince readers overall.

The challenges of interdisciplinarity arise in part from the ontological and methodological ambivalence of characters (Frow 1986: 227): they stand in a close mimetic relation to human beings but also in a close genetic relation to texts. In many ways, characters are often perceived in analogy to real persons and loaded with folk psychological assumptions, judgements, or explanations without adequate consideration of the differences between media and reality. In extreme cases, this may lead to irrational or even pathological parasocial interaction, such as fans writing letters to the residents of *Coronation Street* (1960–). In contrast to real beings, however, characters result from interaction with artefacts, as products of reading, watching films, going to the theatre, etc. They are created by human communication, constituted

through signs and texts, and they are subject to a logic of their own, which can deviate from the laws of reality in many ways. What, then, are characters—represented persons, fictional human beings, or nodal points in texts? This ontological question is of fundamental consequence for the methodology of character analysis: Are we to analyse characters psychologically and judge them morally like human beings, or are we to dissect them like texts according to their formal structures? Is Hamlet merely a proper name to which properties are associated through textual utterances, or can one meaningfully query whether he really loved Ophelia?

For a long time, rival theories of character have uncompromisingly opposed each other with regard to this question.¹⁵ In the meantime, however, the insight has been gaining ground that the consequences of a methodological polarisation are fatal. If characters are considered solely as textual functions, with focus placed on the means of their construction, then important questions of content—for instance, representations of humanity, the communication of values, and affective engagement—are overlooked. Conversely, the aesthetic strategies in the formation of characters as well as the deep-seated differences between characters and persons tend to be ignored during analysis if characters are seen merely as mimetic analogues of real persons. The question is, therefore, how one can connect the different theoretical positions so as to do justice to the diverse aspects of characters.

1.4 The Structure of the Book

Theories are complex answers to complicated questions. In the given case, the guiding question runs: How can the analysis, interpretation, and critique of characters in films and other media be improved? The book is, therefore, decidedly geared towards the practice of analysis. It is intended to help us perceive characters more precisely, recognise textual strategies, and understand the involvement of the audience. In addition, it hopefully makes it easier to assess certain sociocultural effects of characters and develop ideas for creative practice. These goals can be best achieved by means of an integrative project. However, the integration of different approaches and arguments is not easy, because the positions concerning characters diverge so strongly. This

15 Cf. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan: 'Whereas in mimetic theories (i.e. theories which consider literature as, in some sense, an imitation of reality) characters are equated with people, in semiotic theories they dissolve into textuality' (1996: 33). The debate between these theories is much older and still continues today. Already before 1970, W. J. Harvey distinguished the 'autonomy theory', which considers works of art as self-sufficient artefacts and insists on a primarily formal analysis (Susan Sontag's essay 'Against Interpretation' (1966) may serve as an example here), and the 'mimesis theory', which considers the relation between the work of art and the world to be central (Harvey 1970: 11ff.). Structuralist conceptions, which might be taken to be variants of the autonomy theory, have dominated the discussion. As they defined 'the character as a mere referential network of textual signs', blocked out its reference to the world, and put an ever-increasing distance between themselves and the experience of the 'normal reader' and the 'normal viewer', they ultimately brought all character-research to a standstill (Jannidis 2000: 4; cf. further Michaels 1998: xiii f.).

makes it necessary to work through a large body of theoretical reflections and provide arguments that may seem to be obvious for one side, but controversial for another. The book will, therefore, not always be easy reading, but I sincerely hope that it will prove worthwhile in the end.

The structure of the book will take into account the different interests of the readers in the following way. There are two kinds of chapters. Most aim to develop specific concepts of character analysis and lead at the end to a set of guiding questions that can be directly applied. Others will concentrate on the theoretical groundwork and have been marked with a '(T)' to enable less theory-bent readers to bypass them. Their most important results will be condensed in the form of diagrams, and they will be briefly summarised at the beginning of the chapters dealing more with practical analysis. Readers may also, if they wish, start with the general summary in Chapter 15 and then read those sections which are of the greatest interest to them.

The sixteen chapters of the book have been assembled in eight parts. Part I lays the theoretical foundation. Since the time of Aristotle, an intensive debate on the phenomenon 'character' has been going on, which has produced extremely differing positions (Chapter 2). In order to integrate the dispersed and controversial research results, it must first be clarified what characters actually are, how they originate, and how they are experienced (Chapter 3). I will argue that characters are best understood as represented beings that are experienced in individual reception, but are constructed through social communication and thus intersubjectively given. How we perceive and experience such represented beings can be described on the basis of a four-level model of reception, which has far-reaching consequences for the analysis.

Building on this foundation, a general heuristic model of analysis, the Character Clock, is proposed in Chapter 4, which forms the short but central Part II of the book. This basic schema distinguishes four dimensions or aspects that may be considered in analysis: characters are, firstly, inhabitants of a represented (fictional) world; secondly, artefacts of a particular mould; thirdly, symbols conveying higher-level meanings and themes; and fourthly, symptoms permitting inferences about their causes and effects in extratextual reality, particularly in their production and reception. In each one of these dimensions, characters are embedded in specific contexts and trigger certain kinds of affects. And each one of these four dimensions can attract the attention of the audience most strongly and thus become especially relevant for the analysis.

The subsequent parts differentiate each of the four dimensions of the Character Clock model into more detailed categories. In Part III, the character is treated as a represented being: How are such beings perceived and understood, and how can one analyse them? My view here is that on the one hand, we experience characters in many ways like real persons, because our experience is partly based on mental dispositions derived from everyday life—folk psychology, for instance (Chapter 5). On the other hand, however, the influence of further, media-specific dispositions (a knowledge of media communication and its genres, for instance) distinguishes our mental models

of characters and real beings. Still, both share many basic structures, and human-like characters can thus be described more precisely with categories discussed in Chapter 6. The examination of body, mind, sociality, and behaviour of represented persons can make use of various concepts of the human and social sciences, in order to enhance sensibility and enable more nuanced descriptions. In the field of character psychology, it becomes especially clear how strongly the results of analyses depend on the choice of suitable categories: different conceptions of the mind will lead to widely divergent ideas of one and the same character.

We perceive characters, nonetheless, not only as represented beings but also as artefacts that have been designed and formed in a specific manner (Part IV). Chapter 7 presents the essential means and ways of shaping characters in media texts. Media-specific means, such as the performance by human actors in film or theatre, present characters concretely to our senses. Narrative, rhetoric, and other large-scale structures shape the flow of character-related information and the development of character models. The result are characters endowed with characteristic properties as artefacts, which we often refer to with expressions like 'realistic', 'stereotypical', 'multidimensional', or their antonyms (Chapter 8). The specific constellation of such properties and conventions characterises general conceptions of characters in mainstream, independent, or experimental media production, to which creators and audiences orient themselves in production and reception.

After the general examination of characters as represented beings and artefacts, Part V turns to the embedding of individual characters in two contexts that are of special importance to narration and interpretation. The motives and conflicts of characters form their interface with the action and plot of narratives (Chapter 9), and as protagonists or antagonists, leading or minor characters, they take up specific positions within a character constellation (Chapter 10). Their motivation and their relationships with the other inhabitants of their world contribute decisively to their characterisation and may be investigated in greater detail by means of concepts that derive from psychology and sociology, but also from screenwriting manuals.

As the motives, conflicts, and relationships of represented beings often also determine their personality and their development, and as they contribute to a film's higher-level meanings, they are of special relevance to the consideration of characters as symbols and symptoms, which follows in Part VI. This consideration will remain restricted to the most general fundamentals, because adequate models for analysis are not yet available and need to be developed in close association with complex theories of interpretation and impact. Part VI attempts to take a few steps in that direction in order to facilitate the interpretation and cultural analysis of characters. The initial question concerns the ways in which characters as secondary signs, or 'symbols' in a wide sense, can stand for something other than themselves, can convey more abstract meanings, and can contribute to the themes of films (Chapter 11). Their analysis as 'symptoms', in the broad sense of sociocultural factors and indicators, will eventually

include their extratextual situations, causes and effects in reality (Chapter 12).

Parts I to VI of the book also concern the reception of characters but concentrate primarily on their recognition and comprehension. Building on that, Part VII deals more extensively with the imaginative and affective involvement with characters and proposes novel approaches to its analysis. Following the clarification of widespread but problematical concepts like 'perspective', 'identification', 'empathy', and 'parasocial interaction', a model of imaginative closeness and distance to characters is developed, which encompasses a network of diverse factors (Chapter 13). This model serves as the basis for a new conception of affective involvement with characters, which emphasises the variety of their perspectival appraisal (Chapter 14). Part VIII of the book summarises the main findings in two ways: firstly, through a theoretical overview (Chapter 15), and secondly, through a case study of a challenging and controversial film, Roman Polanski's *Death and the Maiden* (Chapter 16). Both can also be read as starting points for looking back at the more detailed earlier chapters.

Overall, my answers to the question of how characters can be understood differ from previous theories in the following central points (and many minor ones): I argue that characters are fourfold phenomena and thus more complex than most other theories assume: they are simultaneously artefacts, represented beings, symbols, and symptoms and thus at the same time aesthetic elements of media texts, inhabitants of storyworlds, carriers of discursive meanings, and indicators of communicative reality. In order to understand and analyse them, we need to consider all these four different aspects, and not just the 'twofoldness' of characters as virtual persons and products of design (Smith 2011) or the 'threefoldness' of their mimetic, synthetic, and thematic components (Phelan 1989). In this way, my approach emphasises the communicative construction of characters and their relationship to social discourses and contexts. Furthermore, it distinguishes different ways of experiencing characters that go beyond identification, sympathy, antipathy, or empathy. As I will show, the multifaceted experience of characters is based on the development of mental models, dynamic, vivid fusions of perception and imagination, which are then connected to and embedded in other mental processes. This theoretical approach makes it possible to integrate insights and analytical tools from a wider range of academic disciplines.

The theses and tools in this book are explained using many different examples, both from the mainstream and the margins of film production. These examples have been chosen mainly because they are suitable for illustrating the topics covered. Most of them can only be dealt with briefly, but there are also some more extensive ones. The Hollywood classic *Casablanca* and its main character Rick Blaine are analysed across all chapters so that a comprehensive picture emerges step by step. At the end of the book, Roman Polanski's chamber play *Death and the Maiden* (Chapter 16), which is more than fifty years younger than *Casablanca*, will allow a closer look at the interplay of its few characters and raise difficult questions about their symptomatic relations to the filmmaker's disturbing personal history. In both cases, no claim is made for exhaustive

interpretations, but I hope that they illustrate the analytical potential of my theory and show that the conceptual tools developed in this book make it possible to go beyond many available interpretations. A number of other examples serve a further purpose: to broaden our understanding of how we deal with characters in practice, including the representation of marginalised and disadvantaged groups in society. Although I have tried to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the book (particularly in Chapters 5 and 10–14), I am aware that it does not do full justice to the sophisticated discussion on these issues. In retrospect, I have come to realise how much my choice of film examples and parts of my argument were influenced by my own background, its privileges and prejudices, and the zeitgeist in which I wrote the book. Nonetheless, I hope that the foundations developed in this book will also prove useful to those looking more closely at the social specificity and cultural impact of characters.

PART I: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS (T)

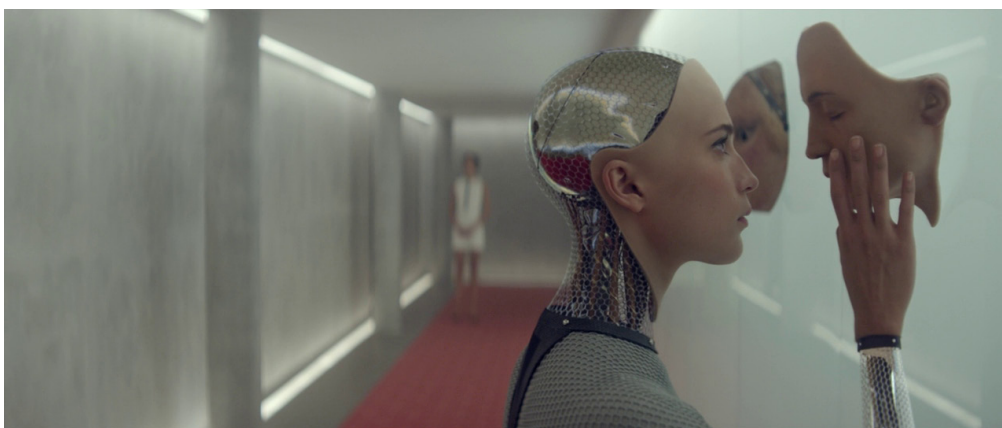


Fig. 1 The gynoid Ava in *Ex Machina* may serve as an example of the many ways in which characters are experienced and discussed: as persons in a storyworld (not necessarily human); as artefacts (shaped by writing, directing, acting, and visual effects); as carriers of meaning (such as thoughts about artificial intelligence); and as indicators and factors of sociocultural reality (here, for example, concerning the male gaze, gender, and power relations). (Dir. Alex Garland, *Ex Machina*, 2014, Film4/DNA Films, UK/USA. All rights reserved.)

Part I

As Chapter 1 has shown, characters raise a multitude of questions: about their ontology and genesis, their reception and structure, their relations to texts and cultures, their different forms and types. So far, there seems to be no theory that comprehensively answers these questions, and thus no suitable basis for an adequate analysis of characters. The task of Chapter 2 is therefore to provide an overview of the history and current state of research in various disciplines in order to point out possibilities for integrating their findings. Such integration in turn requires answering the general questions of what characters are, how they are created, and how they are experienced. Chapter 3 develops answers to these questions and presents their consequences for analytical and interpretive practice. Part I of this book thus provides a theoretical foundation for the development of more nuanced models of analysis in the following parts.

2. Research on Characters: An Overview (T)

It has repeatedly been pointed out that the factor ‘character’ has been neglected in theories of film and other narrative media.¹ As early as the late 1980s, John Frow observed: ‘The concept of character is perhaps the most problematic and the most under-theorised of the basic categories of narrative theory’ (1988: 227). And this is still true today.

Many different reasons have been given for the disregard of characters (e.g., Hochman 1985; Schlobin 1999): for instance, a general orientation towards abstract structures that resulted in a neglect of individuals; a widespread distrust of notions of psychology, personality, and morality; a formalist modernism in the arts which is supposed to have reduced the aesthetic significance of characters; an increasing triviality of characters in the mass media; a wearing-down of character-centred interpretations; the difficulty of carrying out theoretical work on characters according to scientific criteria; or the preponderance of formalist theories over content-oriented ones. The reluctance of scholars to address the subject may therefore also be due to the difficulties of the subject itself.

This does not mean that only few have dealt with characters at all. But many have written only little, and only few have written much about the topic, the number of topics discussed intensively is comparatively small, and the ‘middle level’ of theory—between the study of particular individual characters and the analysis of abstract (‘actant’) functions—is largely missing (Stückrath 1992: 107). Many articles and book chapters deal with particular aspects, but there are hardly any comprehensive theoretical presentations. A handful of monographs on the subject have been published in English, French and Italian film and literary theory.² The present book seeks to build on the available works from different disciplines and schools of thought and to develop their results further. Its approach is systematic and not historical. For the purposes of orientation, however, a brief diachronic summary of the most important studies on characters will be given.

1 Cf. e.g., Chatman 1978: 107; Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 29; Michaels 1998: xiii; Schlobin 1999.

2 For film theory, see esp. Smith 1995, Tomasi 1988, and the survey of French work by Blüher 1999. For literary studies, see the publications by Koch 1991, Nieragden 1995, Schneider 2000, and Jannidis 2004. A bibliography of relevant literature up to 2008 is provided by Eder 2008d. More recent publications that came out after the first edition of this book are mentioned at the end of this chapter.

One of the challenges here is that there is no canon of classic texts on character theory. Most work on characters consists of scattered articles in various disciplines, applying heterogeneous approaches to very different topics. By far the largest number of publications dealing with characters in more depth come from literary, film and media studies. Other disciplines have tended to focus on selected aspects of characters, such as their ontology and ethical significance (philosophy), aesthetic form and higher meaning (art history), reception and experience (psychology), or social uses and effects (sociology). Comprehensive and interdisciplinary discussions are rare and have only recently begun to develop. Given the immense, diverse, and scattered literature, the following, admittedly Eurocentric and incomplete selection focuses on the most fundamental, comprehensive, and influential publications written in English and German (and a few in French and Italian). Even then, their arguments can only be roughly outlined, and it will be necessary to translate and simplify their terminology. However, numerous particularly relevant theories are discussed in more detail in the appropriate places in the book.

Here, the term 'theory' is used in a broad sense: as methodical, argumentatively structured thinking about a subject.³ Two general kinds of theories of character may be distinguished. *Descriptive* theories search for concepts that enable the most precise description, analysis, and interpretation of characters and the most thorough reflection on them. Their queries are, for example: What are characters, how are they structured, what effects may they have and why? *Prescriptive* theories, on the other hand, seek to lay down pragmatic rules for characterisation and normative criteria of evaluation. Their basic query is: How should characters be designed to achieve or avoid particular effects? Prescriptive theories develop their categories as means to serve practical or artistic goals, and they exclude any kinds of characterisation or effects that do not fit their normative premises. In contrast, descriptive theories strive for objectivity, general validity, and systematic analysis in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the whole spectrum of characters' forms and effects. Until the end of the nineteenth century, practically only prescriptive theories existed; after that, descriptive theories increasingly emerged. Normative poetics has never been fully eliminated, however, as the large amount of literature on scriptwriting shows.

While this book pursues a descriptive goal, prescriptive theories are nevertheless of interest because they often contain relevant observations and arguments and point to intended effects. The history of the theory of characters thus also proves to be a history of changing normative ideas in the arts, as well as changing images of humanity and personality. The following survey is limited to works with a more general scope and excludes the countless analyses of particular characters and character types. A further

3 As I include prescriptive approaches, my understanding of theory is even broader than, for instance, Casetti's notion of 'theory' as 'a totality of assumptions—more or less organised, more or less explicit, more or less obligatory—serving a group of scholars to understand and to explain the makeup of the particular object under investigation' (Casetti 1993: 2).

area is also omitted here: theories of acting have been around for centuries. Systematic or historical analyses of acting styles are complemented by typologies, portraits, and analyses of stars.⁴ The predominant occupation with the actors' performance, however, encompasses only a small and specific, albeit important aspect of the theory of characters, which will be addressed in later chapters (particularly Chapter 7).

2.1 From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century

Before film became a leading medium, characters were primarily a subject of normative theories of drama, more rarely of poetry or rhetoric. These theories certainly had an influence on later ideas about characters in more recent media. One of the earliest and most influential conceptions can be found in Aristotle's *Poetics* (ca. 335 B.C.), mentioned already in Chapter 1 (Aristotle 1902, esp. Chapters 6 and 13–16). His brief description concentrates on two aspects. The first concerns the relationship between character and plot (*mythos*) and the question which of these two elements of the drama is more important. In this context, Aristotle distinguishes between a character as a mere function of the action (*pratto*n), and its moral properties (*ethos*). For the action of a drama, personal agents are essential but not a detailed presentation of their (moral) qualities for its own sake. For Aristotle, the plot takes priority over the delineation of characters: 'For tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality' (1902: 27). The question of the primacy of character or action has never since ceased to be a matter of controversial debate (see Chapter 1).

The second character-related aspect of the *Poetics* concerns the creation of characters, especially the endowment of the tragic protagonists with particular moral qualities. Aristotle here formulates rules for well-made characters in four spheres of properties: the hero must be 'good', out of the ordinary, but not hyper-idealised. Their properties must be 'appropriate' to their role and to the attitudes of their society. Thirdly, they should be true to life and, finally, they should be consistent in themselves. In saying this, Aristotle is thinking of particular effects: the way the hero is portrayed should help lead the spectators to catharsis through the experience of 'pity and fear' (*eleos* and *phobos*). Aristotle's basic requirements on characters in order to reach certain effects cannot only be found in most of the poetics written after his time, but also in current handbooks for screenwriting, which often refer directly to this classic source (e.g., Blacker 1986: 35f.).

In the following centuries, rhetorical treatises, starting with *Characters* by Aristotle's disciple Theophrastus (ca. 319 B.C.), offer instructions for the representation of typical characters that may be used as illustrative examples in speeches and artworks (Smeed 1985; Koch 1991: 88–99). And about 200 years after Aristotle's poetics, Horace's *Ars*

4 Classic texts on acting, actors, and stars in film are, for instance, Naremore 1988 and Dyer 1999.

poetica stresses the need for consistency and coherence of content and style in the characters of dramas and poems (Koch 1991: 32ff.). According to him, characters handed down through myths and histories must not be altered, but rendered faithfully in keeping to tradition and taste (of the cultural elite). The features of the characters must contribute to a consistent image, corresponding to certain character types. At about the same time in India, the dramaturgical treatise *Nāṭya Śāstra* relates various other character types to questions of adequate representation and emotional performance (Zysk 2018), but for reasons of expertise and space, this survey has to concentrate on the Western tradition, which still dominates the theoretical discourse today. Here, the works of Aristotle and Horace remained fixed reference points for practically any theory of characters over more than 2000 years, into the eighteenth century. The early treatises of poetics following Aristotle are usually the work of dramatists such as Lodovico Castelvetro, Nicolas Boileau, or Pierre Corneille. They are geared towards practical creation and evaluation of plays for the theatre and prescribe what successful characters should be like. The fundamental criteria introduced by Aristotle are expanded by later authors. Johann Christoph Gottsched, for example, adds rules for the representation of characters' virtues and affects (Gabel 1993).

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the theoretical discussion of characters is dominated by such normative poetics. The rules they formulate for the conception of characters vary according to prevalent images of humanity, social norms, artistic goals, and cultural attitudes of the respective periods and their dominant worldviews, mostly shaped by a strongly hierarchical and patriarchal feudalism or early capitalism. Before Gottsched, for example, it was generally believed that the genre and the kind of affective participation in characters must be coupled to the social position of these characters. Lamented tragic heroes must be of high social status, ridiculed comical characters of low social status. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, opposed this kind of social status rule (Lessing 1958).

In the late eighteenth century, the rules for portraying characters often follow their functions for the theme of a drama beyond the development of its plot. Relevant examples include, for instance, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's concept of the 'general in the particular', Friedrich Schiller's specification of the 'theatrical stage as a moral institution', and the spread of the 'thesis play' or 'play of ideas', in which the characters express superordinate guiding thoughts or ideologies.⁵ Jean Paul, in his *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, takes up such positions, but also analyses the means of characterisation and examines connections between the characters' traits and their effects, e.g., concerning the extent to which heroic characters may be idealised for the sake of effect and their evil antagonists depicted negatively (Jean Paul 1974: 207–29). While writers and dramatists ponder the construction of characters with regard to the intended

5 In 'Über Egmont, Trauerspiel von Goethe' (1960 [1788]), however, Schiller distinguishes between three different types of drama, which are guided by plot, 'passion', or characters, respectively. *Egmont* is an example of a character-centred drama.

effects, early theorists of literature (often teachers) begin to consider characters as a subject matter from which lessons may be learnt about life. ‘Characteristics’ emerge that describe characters and interpret their particular moral qualities—still, however, without an advanced method and without a proper analysis of strategies of representation (Weimar 1989: 350ff.).

In the nineteenth century, studies of literature and other arts become established as independent fields of academic research, but their main focus is an aesthetics of production and only marginally a theory of characters, although there are a large number of interpretations of particular characters. Whereas the literary praxis of realism and naturalism seeks to represent characters as a ‘product of societal conditions’ (Platz-Waury 1997: 588), the predominant interest of literary scholarship is concentrated on the question as to how the life experiences of authors are transformed into literature. Even there, characters play only a marginal role, for instance in the search for real-life models of literary characters or the comparison of both.⁶ By contrast, two authors presented treatises on poetics with detailed and influential discussions of characters. Both Gustav Freytag’s *Technik des Dramas* (‘Technique of the Drama’) and Friedrich Spielhagen’s *Beiträge zur Theorie und Technik des Romans* (‘Contributions to the Theory and Technique of the Novel’) advocate, for instance, the concentration on a single protagonist as an active personality with great functional plot relevance, and with as little ‘reflection’ as possible (Freytag 1897: 215–77; Spielhagen 1883: 67–100).

Apart from people involved in the production of literature, philosophical aesthetics also occasionally reflects on characters, generally with a tendency towards normative approaches. In the first third of the nineteenth century, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, for example, derives conceptions of genre-adequate characters from the ‘essential traits’ of literary genres: epic characters should be many-sided and multi-layered, while dramatic characters should primarily serve a function in the plot and support themes.⁷

2.2 Differentiation in the Twentieth Century

With the twentieth century, a process of specialisation and differentiation sets in: writers and philosophers are now joined by literary scholars, sociologists, psychologists like Sigmund Freud or Hugo Münsterberg, and furthermore—relatively early after the emergence of the medium—by film critics and theorists like Béla Balázs (*Der sichtbare Mensch/The Visible Man*, 2001 [1924]). In the course of this differentiation, more and more descriptive theories of characters arise, which are less interested in rules for the successful

6 Relevant texts are Dilthey’s *Poetik* (1924) and the article ‘Lebenswahrheit dichterischer Gestalten’ by Richard M. Meyer (1912). Klaus Weimar offers further examples in his *Geschichte der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft* (Weimar 1989: 404ff.).

7 On epic poetry, see Hegel 1971: 144ff., on drama, pp. 263ff. Hegel accepts Aristotle’s requirement that the plot is of primary importance in drama, and he considers epic poetry, by contrast, to be character-centred.

construction of characters and more in systematic analysis and interpretation. In addition, the range of topics chosen for investigation expands. As the prescriptive theories had, for obvious reasons, dealt with character conceptions, means of characterisation, characters' traits and their functions for the plot and themes, now a variety of other issues come into focus. The theories may be sorted into three large sets according to thematic and methodological aspects. Before turning my attention to these sets of descriptive theories, I shall first sketch out some other conceptions that do not fit very well into them. Some of them are normative poetics, but the majority of these heterogeneous individual approaches can be described as hermeneutic in the broader sense, since they assume a certain form of anthropocentric interpretation and focus on the relationships between characters, human beings, social meanings, and cultural contexts (issues that are taken up again in Chapter 11 and Chapter 12 of this book).

Hermeneutic and Idiosyncratic Approaches

In 1927, the novelist E. M. Forster makes two influential distinctions. The first is between 'homo sapiens' and 'homo fictus': fictional characters are different from real persons, amongst other things, in the emphasis on particular areas of life (especially love and danger) and in that we learn more about them and their inner life than we could ever know about most of our fellow human beings (1927: 87). Forster's second distinction is between 'flat', one-dimensional characters and 'round', complex characters, to which I shall return in later chapters (especially Chapter 8) (1927: 103–118). Both distinctions are of a descriptive kind.

Bertolt Brecht's opposition to the Aristotelian drama and his own conception of the epic theatre, by contrast, quite clearly shows the dependence of normative character conceptions on goals of narrative effect or social impact. Brecht introduces his concept of alienation, distancing, or estrangement effects (*Verfremdungseffekte*) in order to counter the principle of empathy with characters.⁸ Keeping a distance from the role (the exact opposite to 'method acting'), the actor must demonstrate the character instead of embodying it, and must estrange utterances and actions through particular modes of speaking and gesturing. Thereby, the audience is to be kept at an analytical distance from the character in order to reflect on the social influences impinging on it. The character represents not only an individual but also a societal situation or role that is recognised as fundamentally changeable, for 'from the point of view of solitary personalities the most decisive processes of our age can no longer be comprehended, and they can no longer be influenced by a solitary personality'. The goal here is a 'partisan attitude based on clearly apprehended [political] interests' (Brecht 1967a: 246; my translation).

8 See esp. 'Thesen über die Aufgabe der Einfühlung in den theatralischen Künsten' (Brecht 1967a: 244–46), 'Kurze Beschreibung einer neuen Technik der Schauspielkunst, die einen Verfremdungseffekt hervorbringt' (1967: 341–57), and 'Über Stoffe und Form' (1967: 197); also Brecht 1967a: 285–305; 1967b: 661–66; 1967c: 1004–16.

Georg Lukács also pursued a didactic goal on a Marxist basis in his theoretical considerations on literature from the 1930s, albeit in a different way. Lukács considers the task of writers as linking the individual traits of their characters with the general problems of their age and thus making the latter visible. Of particular importance, in his view, is the ‘intellectual physiognomy’, the world view of the characters (1970: 151). The linking of character conceptions with thematic functions of art, which can already be found in the eighteenth century, thus re-emerges here in a socially oriented variant. In his work on the sociology of literature, Lukács accordingly extracts the social problems of an era from the treatment of characters and themes in contemporary works.

In the 1950s, Leo Löwenthal (1986) proceeds in a comparable manner. Using examples from Miguel de Cervantes to Knut Hamsun, he reconstructs the historical changes of images of humanity as well as the social conditions out of which they arose. Around the same time, Northrop Frye develops a typology of protagonists and literary works within his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), distinguishing ‘tragic’ heroes who are socially isolated from ‘comical’ heroes who are socially integrated. The decisive criterion of his typology is, however, the relationship between the power and abilities of the principal character and the (average) reader. Frye’s thesis is that, with the progress of literature from myth to ‘ironical’ forms of narration, the acting power of principal characters tends to diminish. ‘Godlike’ heroes are followed by ‘heroic’ ones, these by ‘epic’, and finally by ‘modern’ ones, until after a period of anti-heroes the cycle is resumed. Hans Robert Jauß’s distinction of different kinds of ‘identification’ with characters (at eye level, from above or from below) resembles Frye’s conception but dispenses with the thesis of a diachronic succession from more to less powerful types (1972; 1982). Charles Child Walcutt considers—in an approach comparable to Löwenthal’s—the historical development of the literary protagonist as ‘a changing mask of humanity’ (*Man’s Changing Mask*, 1966) and like Frye diagnoses a tendency towards weaker and more complex heroes, as well as a ‘dissolution of the self’. In response to modernist and structuralist criticism of literary realism and hermeneutic interpretation, both William John Harvey (1970) and Baruch Hochman (1985) also emphasise the mimetic dimensions of characters and their importance for reflecting on the human condition. Moreover, they distinguish between different narrative types and roles of characters. Among the important contributions of literary studies in the 1980s and 1990s are James Phelan’s (1989) distinctions between mimetic, synthetic, and thematic dimensions of characters, Jörn Stückerath’s analyses of the connections between character and action (1987; 1990; 1992), and Thomas Koch’s (1991) wide-ranging study on different forms and functions of characters and characterisation. I will come back to them later.

The approaches mentioned proceed in a broadly hermeneutic manner: they operate on the basis of interpretative sensibility and experience, presuppose a proper understanding of characters as well as the ability of comprehending them by means

of intuition and human experience, and largely abstain from explicitly clarifying their basic theoretical concepts and methods. For example, they assume that certain kinds of characters have specific causes and effects, but do not ask how these effects come about or how the reception of characters must be modelled in each case. Instead, they tend to tacitly proceed according to the principles of folk psychology. Since about the 1960s, however, other theories have been developing that deal decidedly with fundamental questions of the ontological status, reception, and structure of characters and explicitly state their presuppositions and methodology. These character theories can be divided into three broad groups: structuralist-semiotic, psychoanalytic, and cognitivist theories.

Semiotic and (Post-)Structuralist Theories

The label 'structuralist-semiotic' refers to a direction of research on communication that is primarily interested in the level of the text and less in the investigation of its production and reception, and in which the concepts of sign, structure, and code play central roles.⁹ Semiotics investigates processes of sign use and meaning constitution. The primary aim of structuralism is to discover general surface and deep structures in texts or groups of texts. Both approaches are frequently connected with each other, and the linguistic and semiotic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure serves as a fundamental reference point for both.

In contradistinction to the positions that have been sketched out so far, most structuralist theorists are only marginally interested in psychological conceptions of character or in the relations and connections between characters and images of humanity, moral themes, sociocultural situations, and historical developments. On the contrary, they are quite decidedly opposed to the so far dominant tendency to understand characters like human beings. This earlier tradition is represented most clearly by the English literary scholar A. C. Bradley who, in the 1930s, by combining subtle textual analyses with intuitive inferences attempted to identify character-related 'uncertainty points' in Shakespeare's tragedies and to establish the moral quality of characters (1937). Bradley pursued questions like: Did Hamlet really love Ophelia or not? How old was he?

Semiotic and structuralist research, in contrast, centres on dealing with characters as textual structures and complexes of signs. Structuralists generally blank out the mimetic, moral, and psychological aspects of characters as well as their relationships with worlds beyond the texts and concentrate on their textual structures and functions in the plot. Correspondingly, they define and examine characters not as representations of (human) beings, but as structures in the text. One may identify three central thematic areas within the discussion of characters by structuralist-semiotic theories: (1) the

9 The eminent role of semiotics in film and literary studies is described, for instance, by Casetti 1994: 143–70; Nünning 1998: 485–87, 511–14; Hickethier 2001a: 6.

definition and ontological status of characters, (2) the relation between character and plot, and (3) the signs and structures by means of which characters are constructed and specified.

The first thematic focus is the ontology, textual construction, and internal structure of characters (see also Chapter 3 in this book). Various structuralist authors occupy themselves with the question of what a character is and how it is constituted by the text as a 'bundle of differential elements' (Vernet).¹⁰ Roland Barthes describes in *S/Z* (1974) how the literary text groups units of meaning ('semes') in different ways around a proper name, links them with it, and thus forms the character: 'When identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is created' (1974: 67; cf. also 60ff.). Seymour Chatman takes this up in order to develop his conception of character as a 'paradigm of traits' (1978: 107–37). The literary scholar Philippe Hamon and the film theorist Marc Vernet see characters as 'textual effects' that emerge as the results of construction processes through the interaction of texts and recipients (quoted in Blüher 1999: 65–67; Tomasi 1988: 6f.). Edward Branigan considers them a mere 'surface feature of discourse' (1984: 12).

The question here is what characters are, whereas the second thematic core area 'character and plot' deals with what they do, what general functions they fulfil within a course of action (see Chapter 1 and Chapter 9). Barthes characterises the basic view of structuralists on this point in the following way: 'most important [...] is the definition of the character according to participation in a sphere of actions, these spheres being few in number, typical and classifiable' (1977: 107). Vladimir Propp, in his *Morphology of the Folktale* published in 1928, claims a general pattern of narration underlies all the folktales he investigated (1968: 25–65). As the concrete actions of the tales may be reduced to thirty-one general 'functions' like 'rescue', or 'exposure', so seven 'roles' may be abstracted from the concrete characters and their properties, a typology of plot functions, such as 'hero', 'helper', or 'villain'. A character may assume various such roles within one tale. Jurij M. Lotman, following Propp, designates a character correspondingly as 'the intersection of sets of structural functions' (1972: 341).

The abstraction of general deep structures of narration from concrete characters is taken even further by Algirdas Greimas (1971; 1972; 1974; 1982). In a way similar to Aristotle, Greimas distinguishes between the plot function of a character and its depiction in a text. 'Below' the level of the characters, each one endowed with a text-specific combination of features, he sees an unvarying schema of logical positions ('actants') at work, which underlies all narratives and their constellations of characters. Greimas distinguishes three pairs of action roles: sender–recipient, subject–object, and helper–opponent.¹¹ A character can take on several of these 'actantial roles' at the same

¹⁰ Vernet 1986, quote from Blüher 1999: 66. Cf. also Pfister 1988: 224; Taylor and Tröhler 1999.

¹¹ The model may be broken down into the following questions (see also Chapter 10): Sender: Who or what causes or motivates the action? Recipient: Who will profit from the action? Subject: Who or what executes the action, causes the event? Object: Who or what (what value) is dealt with, who or

time, and an actantial role can also be filled by several characters, by collectives, or even by natural forces and other non-human elements. The 'syntactic' deep structure of the actants is connected with a 'semantic' structure of properties that are implied by the kind of action. The nodal points of this structure, which also represents a link to the theme of the text, are called 'acteurs'. They must not be confused with characters but are part of their constitutive foundations. Greimas later differentiated his actant model further, and other authors have also taken it up (see Chapter 10).¹² André Gardies, for instance, distinguishes between actant, role, character, performer, and the totality of these components, the 'actorial character' (Gardies 1993: 59–63; see Blüher 1999: 62–65). Francesco Casetti and Federico di Chio (1994) make a comparable distinction between three structural levels of characters: person ('persona'), role ('ruolo'), and actant ('attante'). Within these levels they classify different typical forms of representation; a character can thus be flat or round, active or passive (1994: 170–81).

In a third thematic focus, numerous semiotic works examine procedures of sign usage that are involved in the construction of characters (discussed also in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 of this book). Erika Fischer-Lichte, for instance, investigates 'activity' (language, movements, etc.) and 'appearance' (mask, costume, etc.) of actors in theatre as signs (1983a: 31–131). Nicole Brenez (1998) makes the body of actors and its staging a centre of the interpretation of characters (see Blüher 1999: 67–70). A set of tools for the analysis of the constellation, conception, and specification of characters in theatre, including character speech and perspectivisation, has been put together by Manfred Pfister in *The Drama* (1988). In literary studies, Göran Nieragden (1995) developed a narratological model for the analysis of characters, which classifies the character-related statements of a text as descriptions, commentaries, dialogues, and action reports. Anke-Marie Lohmeier (1996) builds on semiotic premises in order to transfer methods of literary studies to the analysis of film, with particular regard to perspectival structures and character conceptions.

Since the eighties, at the latest, semiotic positions have become less rigid and opened up to other approaches and new questions. More and more work diverges from the premises of early structuralism and its restriction to textual structures and turns to socio-semiotic matters. In the area of film theory, Richard Dyer may be quoted as an example. In his important book *Stars*, Dyer analyses semiotic aspects of characters in theatre and film, but cultural contexts and practices of production and reception are equally central to his work (1999). Among other things, he shows how textual structures of characterisation and cultural constructions of star images interact in the comprehension of characters. Branigan, in his investigation of *Point of View in the Cinema* (1984), deals with the representation of subjectivity in films. A

what is the object of the action? Helper: Who or what helps the subject in the execution of the action?
Opponent: Who or what interferes with the subject in the execution of the action?

12 E.g., Jameson, Hamon, Bremond, and Todorov. Similar also Barthes's distinction between 'figure' and 'character' (1974: 67f).

synthesis of semiotic and structuralist investigations of characters for the theory of film is undertaken in Dario Tomasi's book *Il personaggio* ('The Character', 1988). Tomasi presents a survey of strategies of characterisation, following Dyer's work on stars, and develops a conception of character as a system of motives, which is tied into the external system of character constellations.

Post-structuralism, while challenging structuralist assumptions about the determinability, universality and stability of textual meanings, largely adopts structuralism's emphasis with regard to characters. Most of the rare genuinely post-structuralist theories of the character incorporate psychoanalytic positions, which are described in the next section. For example, Thomas Docherty's *Reading (Absent) Character* (1983) combines Derridaian deconstruction with Lacanian psychoanalysis to develop a prescriptive theory that argues for a dissolution of the psychological, consistent character in the novel. According to Docherty, characters are no longer to serve as centres of meaning and identification prescribed by the author, but are to be broken up and decentred in order to make it easier for readers to creatively shape the meaning of the text themselves. Generally, however, more recent semiotic approaches seem to be moving away from post-structuralism and psychoanalysis and more towards cognitive theories (e.g., Buckland 2008).

Psychoanalytical and Feminist Theories

While semiotic positions focus on sign structures, psychoanalytic approaches attempt to explain the minds and actions of characters, as well as their creators and recipients (for more on that, see Chapters 5, 6, 13, and 14 in this book).¹³ In doing that, they focus on unconscious drives, desires, and defence mechanisms as they emerge during psychosexual development in early childhood. Psychoanalysis is essentially a theory of the interrelationships and consequences of such desires, pleasures, fantasies, anxieties, and defence strategies.

In early psychoanalytical interpretations, characters are often seen as motivated by Oedipal desires, and their interrelations are explained by the assumption that they take the positions of father, mother, or child in an Oedipal triangle (e.g., Freud 1989). An extensive interpretation of this kind is given by Sigmund Freud's disciple Ernest Jones in *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949). Later psychoanalytical theorists of literature and film usually refer less to Freud but rather to Lacan, who connects the psychoanalytical with the semiotic approach (for instance, through the concept of the 'symbolic order' to which the child is subjected when acquiring language).¹⁴ In Lacan's theory,

13 According to Norman Holland, 'the psychoanalytic critic can only talk about the minds associated with the book [...] Those are the three people that the psychoanalytic critic can talk about: the author, the audience, and some character represented in or associated with the text' (2000: 13). An elucidation of psychoanalytical approaches is given by Gallas 1992 and Baasner 1996: 139–50. On psychoanalytical theories in film, cf. Hayward 1996a: 273–95 and critically Carroll 1988.

14 A great variety of different psychoanalytical schools (Klein, Kohut, and others) have been applied in

narcissist desires for self-affirmation and recognition, which can ultimately be traced back to the loss of the union with the mother, also play a significant role. Apart from the theories of Freud and Lacan, positions of other psychoanalysts are also taken up. Several screenwriting manuals refer to Carl Gustav Jung's claims about the collective unconscious and universal archetypes (e.g., Jung 1964). The distinction between different archetypal characters is, for instance, observed in the influential scriptwriting guides by Linda Seger (1990) and Christopher Vogler (1992).

Psychoanalytic theorists concerned with the minds of viewers or readers have argued that characters can evoke pleasures and desires of a voyeuristic, sadistic, masochistic, or fetishist kind, as well as processes of transference, introjection, wish projection and, above all, 'identification'.¹⁵ In contrast to some authors who see the spectator's identification with the camera as central and identification with the characters as merely 'secondary', Elizabeth Cowie and other scholars distinguish a broader spectrum of processes of identification with characters that are related, for example, to the spectator's ego ideal.¹⁶

In film theory, psychoanalysis gained great influence in the seventies and eighties, especially in its Lacanian variant and in connection with feminist and queer film theory and ideology-critical goals. Theorists have used psychoanalytic approaches to analyse the responses and desires of female and LGBTQIA+ viewers and their relationships to different kinds of characters, as well as the cinematic representation of female or queer characters, for example in genres such as melodrama and horror films, of gender roles, of motherhood, mother-daughter relationships, masculinity, or intersectionality.¹⁷ One of the most formative studies is Laura Mulvey's diagnosis of a gender bias in Hollywood cinema that perpetuates a patriarchal social structure (1989; Friedberg 1990). While male characters dominate as active protagonists and identification figures, female characters are paraded as spectacular objects of male desire and 'scopophilia', at once fetishised and disempowered because, Mulvey argues, they pose a castration threat to male viewers and thus generate hatred and fear. Female viewers, according to Mulvey, are thus forced into a position of reception made by men for men: 'the sexualised image of woman says little or nothing about women's reality, but is symptomatic of male fantasy and anxiety that are projected on to the female image' (1989: xiii). Later feminist film scholars have dealt intensively with Mulvey's model and have criticised and modified it in various ways, mostly also on a psychoanalytical basis. Jacqueline Bobo's and Jackie Stacey's empirical studies indicated that female viewers engage in various different ways with female stars and characters, often diverging from Mulvey's

literary studies (less so in film analysis), and it has become impossible to keep track of the resulting amount of scholarly work. Bibliographies list more than 20,000 entries of psychoanalytical literary theory and interpretation just up to 1980 (Holland 2000: 13).

15 E.g., see Elizabeth Cowie 1997: 112ff.; also, the work by Laura Mulvey, Gaylyn Studlar, Christian Metz, and others; for a critical review, see Gaut 2000.

16 See Cowie 1997: 72–122; Aumont, Bergala, and Marie 1992: 182–238; also Part VII of this book.

17 For brief surveys of the field, see Cunliffe 2019; Smelik 2007; Allen 1999: 137–41.

schema (Bobo 1988; Stacey 1994: 126–75); Elizabeth Cowie (1997) has described a complex network of fantasy and identification processes (1997; see Part VII of this book); and Christine Gledhill (1995) has suggested that female viewers respond to male characters through processes of recognition, symbolic figuration, ideological negotiation, and fantasy. More recent works in feminist film and media theory also point to limitations of Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis, for example with regard to the diversity, intersectionality, identity, and activity of audiences in their experience of female, male or diverse characters (for an overview, see Cunliffe 2019; Smelik 2007). Although these and other feminist film theories focus on the categories of gender and sexual orientation, they often also suggest theoretical conceptions of characters and their reception more generally.

Cognitive and Media-Psychological Theories

Like semiotics and psychoanalysis, the field of cognitive theories also comprises rather different positions (see Chapters 3, 5, 13, and 14).¹⁸ Cognitive theories of media and characters draw on findings and methods from the interdisciplinary cognitive sciences, analytical philosophy, empirical psychology, the neurosciences, or biology. On this basis, they are ‘committed to clarity of exposition and argument and to the relevance of empirical evidence and the standards of science’ (Plantinga 2002: 21). In terms of content, cognitive theories focus primarily on the relations between structures of texts and the perceptual, cognitive, and affective responses of recipients. In contrast to semiotics, they explain the understanding and experience of media texts not primarily in reference to cultural codes and in analogy to the comprehension of language, but rather in reference to mental structures and in analogy to everyday perception and problem-solving. Cognitivists often regard psychoanalytical theories with scepticism because they see them as failing to meet the demands of conceptual precision and empirical verifiability. However, cognitivism in no way supports the assumption that all processes of film experience are conscious and rational. On the contrary, ‘cognition’ must be understood in a very broad sense, for instance as responding to textual ‘cues’ or processing information, which includes perceptual and affective processes and often takes place in preconscious or biased ways.

As early as 1916, the psychologist Hugo Münsterberg propounded ideas about responses of film viewers to characters, which inspired later cognitivism. However, genuine cognitive media theories were only established in the 1980s, and only recently have character-related topics gained ground, with a focus on comprehending characters and emotionally responding to them. For instance, Gregory Currie examines

¹⁸ For instance, Noël Carroll and Gregory Currie are analytical philosophers, Ed Tan and Tim Smith are psychologists, and David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson are ‘neo-formalist’ film theorists. For a definition of cognitivism see Plantinga 2002; also Bordwell 1992: 5ff.; Bordwell and Carroll 1996; Smith 1995; Schwan and Hesse 1996; Currie 1999a; Rusch 1998a, 1998b.

the ontology of characters (1990: 127–81) and the question as to what it means to put oneself in the position of fictional characters and ‘identify’ oneself with them (1995: 152–97); or David Bordwell suggests that the comprehension of characters involves ‘agent-based schemata’ in the minds of viewers (1992: 13). Further questions relating to the emotional engagement with characters have been intensively discussed by various authors (see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14).¹⁹ Two monographs on the cognitive and affective reception of characters are particularly noteworthy and will be discussed in more detail in later chapters. In film studies, Murray Smith’s seminal book *Engaging Characters* (1995) distinguishes between three general processes of character reception: recognition, alignment, and allegiance, which can interact with empathic responses. According to Smith, viewers recognise characters on the basis of the ‘person schema’ and imaginative processes, they align with them by following them through the narrative and accessing their thoughts, and they form sympathetic allegiances with them based mostly on moral evaluations. In rarer responses of empathy, they can also share the characters’ perspectives and feelings. In literary studies, Ralf Schneider proposes an alternative approach to the reception of characters (2000), claiming that readers understand characters by developing dynamic mental models of them (an approach I will follow in Chapter 5). On this basis, he discusses the constitution, form, and emotional impact of characters as well as their historical dimensions in Victorian novels.

To develop their differentiated theories of character reception, both Schneider and Smith make use of psychological findings, and more generally, many cognitive theories are influenced by empirical approaches in media psychology that examine responses to characters in film and literature, from excitation to parasocial interaction, identification, and empathy.²⁰ In literary studies, for example, Gerrig’s and Allbritton’s model of the construction of characters by readers (1990) has been influential. In contrast, cognitive theories in film and literary studies have hardly found their way into empirical psychology, which instead prefers its own, often cruder theories of the character. Psychological theories are usually limited to the aspect of the empirical reception of characters by certain audience groups, excluding any other dimension of character theory (although some also make generalising claims). Most psychologists subsume the various processes of character reception under the general heading of ‘parasocial interaction’.²¹ This concept was developed in 1956 by Horton and Wohl to describe the relationship between television hosts and their viewers (1986), and it

19 Among the earlier publications are Smith 1995; Plantinga and Smith 1999; Gaut 1999; Neill 1996; Carroll 1998b, 1999; Plantinga 1999; Grodal 1998, 2001; Zillmann 1991; Wulff 1996, 1997; Ryssel and Wulff 2000; Tan 1996; Hogan 2003b.

20 E.g., Bryant and Zillmann 1991; Frijda and Schram 1994. However, cognitive theories of the character also come from other disciplines, such as Jonathan Culpeper’s cognitive-linguistic analyses of characterisation in drama (2000).

21 E.g., Hippel 1992; Vorderer 1996; Giles 2002; Hartmann, Klimmt, and Schramm 2004; Cohen, Oliver, and Bilandzic 2019.

suggests that responding to characters is largely similar to interacting with real persons in everyday life. In the course of this book, particularly Part I and Part VII, the limits of this perspective (as well as of the alternative concept of ‘identification’) will become clear. Meanwhile, the exchange between psychological and cognitive media theories of the character has intensified, but certain areas of research are still underdeveloped in both fields, for example with regard to the sociocultural forms, roles, and contexts of characters.

2.3 Polyphony and Possibilities of Integration in the Early Twenty-First Century

As already mentioned, this research overview is inevitably subjective and selective. In a separate bibliography of more than forty pages, I have attempted to provide a more complete survey of the state of research until 2008 (Eder 2008b). This survey indicates that in the 1990s, a multitude of different prescriptive and descriptive theories of the character coexist and compete, and that this polyphony has increased considerably since then. Between 1990 and 2008 (when the German-language first edition of this book was published), many works on specific aspects of characters appear, as well as a few that attempt to develop a more comprehensive picture. Moreover, a cautious exchange between different theories and disciplines begins. After 2008, this exchange again intensifies considerably and numerous more detailed studies on specific topics come out.

In order to roughly organise the large field, a distinction between basic and more specific theories is useful. Basic theories aim to describe the ontology, genesis, fundamental structures, and relations of characters in general, as some of the hermeneutic and most of the semiotic, psychoanalytical, and cognitive approaches outlined above. Specific theories instead focus more narrowly on particular kinds, forms, or aspects of characters and their relationships to certain media, genres, times, audiences, aesthetic conventions, social groups, or cultural contexts. These specific theories build (often implicitly) on deeper underlying assumptions that are explicitly discussed in basic theories. This overview concentrates on basic, general approaches also because the number and range of specific theories is too large to do them justice here. I can only broadly outline a few main strands and refer readers to the subsequent chapters of this book, which deal with central topics in more depth.

Most normative theories are specific in that they pursue aesthetic, ethical, or sociocultural goals related to the use of certain kinds of characters. In the context of moral education, social enlightenment, political agitation, emotional sensitisation, or aesthetic innovation, they recommend certain types or forms of characters and criticise others. This applies to poetics from Aristotle to Brecht to today’s screenwriting guides, as well as to social and ideological criticism committed to combating escapism, stereotyping, or discrimination. Central to the approaches of critical theory, discourse

analysis, and cultural studies are questions of representation, power, and appropriation (see Chapters 5, 10, and 13): How are social groups represented through characters, how do diverse audiences deal with them, and how are societal power relations established as a result? Such questions are discussed by the above-mentioned feminist theories, as well as critical race theories, gender, queer, or postcolonial studies, among others. For example, Stuart Hall (1997) and bell hooks (1992) published formative works on the representation of Black people in popular culture. From a semiotic cultural studies perspective, John Fiske (1987: 149–78) proposed a methodology for analysing characters' ideological meanings. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2004) provide a concise overview about 'representing race, class, gender, and sexuality at the movies'. Dan Flory (2008) examines Black characters from a cognitive perspective. Edward Schiappa (2008) argues for an alternative to cultural studies, based on social psychology and the 'parasocial contact hypothesis'. Other authors describe racist stereotypes of African Americans (Bogle 2004), Latinx (Berg 2002), or Arabs (Shaheen 2001).

These more descriptive theories show that by no means all theories on specific types or aspects of character are normative; there are, of course, many descriptive ones. Historical theories, for example, describe and analyse only characters of a certain time, for example in modernist film (Michaels 1998) or Soviet cinema (Attwood 1993). This historiographical focus could also be one reason why disciplines such as art history, despite their long tradition, have, as far as I know, not produced any general theories of the character, but only detailed studies on certain kinds of figures in their cultural contexts (e.g., Barasch 1991).

Other descriptive works, again, have a narrative focus. Some examine character types of certain genres, such as monsters and mad scientists in horror films (Tudor 1989; Carroll 1990); robots and cyborgs in science fiction (Telotte 1995); or personalities taken from reality in the biopic (Taylor 2002). An anthology edited by Paul Loukides and Linda K. Fuller (1990) looks at stock characters in American popular film and their sociocultural contexts. Alex Woloch (2003) develops a theory of secondary ('minor') characters and their formative relations to protagonists. Margrit Tröhler explores 'open' character constellations without heroes (Tröhler 2007). James Phelan (2005) examines how literary characters can function as narrators. A larger number of publications are dedicated to the connections between characters and certain aesthetic forms or means of creation and characterisation, usually within a specific medium. These include, for example, several of the (post-)structuralist or semiotic works mentioned above. In film studies, the literature on acting and performance (Naremore 1988; Stern and Kouvaros 1999; Riis 2008) as well as on stars (Stacey 1992; Dyer 1999; Redmond and Holmes 2007) is particularly relevant here. This field of the aesthetics of characters is again so large and diverse that I can only refer to later chapters here (especially Chapter 7 and Chapter 8). The same is true for research on the reception of characters (see the above sections on psychoanalytical, cognitive, and media psychological theories, as well as Chapter 13 and Chapter 14). Entire disciplines such as psychology concentrate on this aspect alone.

All these basic and specific theories from different disciplines now coexist and compete, and an exchange between them develops only slowly and not very systematically. Most of the approaches within this polyphony seem to be hardly compatible with each other in their basic assumptions, as they are based on different conceptions of theory, method, meaning, media, human, and non-human beings. Nevertheless, many of their insights are clearly complementary, and since the late 1980s some positions have begun to integrate findings from other theoretical camps. For example, early cognitivists already concede that psychoanalysis could help explain certain audience reactions (Bordwell 1985a: 30; Currie 1999a: 107), and conversely, some psychoanalytically orientated scholars suggest taking cognitive neuroscience into account (Holland 2000; 1992). More generally, some authors suggest that different basic theories, such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, semiotics, and cognitivism, are fundamentally compatible and their perspectives can be synthesised (e.g., Bacon 2005).

Since the 1990s, a growing number of character researchers have been working in an interdisciplinary manner, combining concepts from different theoretical approaches. This is no coincidence. The various groups of theories each have a lot to offer for character analysis in their specific areas. Structuralism, for instance, provides concepts and models of meaning, representation, action roles, and character constellations. Cognitive theories, media psychology, and psychoanalysis offer differing concepts of reception and the minds of characters. Hermeneutics, sociology, and cultural studies provide typologies of characters and model their sociocultural contexts and development. All these approaches can be supplemented by suggestions from practical manuals for writing, acting, or directing, which often deal with important topics as yet neglected by research.

I can only mention an exemplary selection of important positions here. In film and media studies, these include, for example, Hans Jürgen Wulff's work on character synthesis, empathy, and morality (1996; 1997), Christine Noll Brinckmann's essays on aesthetics and empathy (1997a; 1997b; 1999), Richard Dyer's analyses of the star phenomenon (1999), Lothar Mikos' outline of character types and role identification (1998), Michael Z. Newman's examination of the social perception of characters (2006), as well as work on the formation of narrative stereotypes (Schweinitz 2006). Another focus of research investigates characters in the context of fictional worlds (Ryan 1991, Doležel 1998) or examines how readers and viewers interact with characters' fictional minds (Palmer 2004, 2010; Zunshine 2006). Approaches that cross or bridge different theoretical fields have also become established in literary studies. Uri Margolin's series of pioneering articles on various aspects of characters (1986; 1990) were followed, for example, by Fotis Jannidis' seminal work *Figur und Person* ('Character and Person', 2004). Most of these works combine concepts from semiotic and cognitive approaches, media psychology, and cultural studies. The increasing exchange between different strands of research is also reflected in the publication of special issues on characters in several journals, such as *Style* 24.3 (1990) on 'Literary Character' and *Iris* 24 (1997) on 'The Filmic Character', bringing together contributions on a broad range of topics.

However, monographs that develop basic theories of characters and deal systematically with fundamental questions of their ontology, genesis, reception, and most general structures are still rare. In film studies, Murray Smith's *Engaging Characters* (1995) has been most influential; his book was recently reissued with a new afterword (2022). In literary studies, the most comprehensive works are Schneider's *Grundriss zur kognitiven Theorie der Figurenrezeption* ('Outline of a Cognitive Theory of Character Reception', 2000) and Jannidis' *Figur und Person* (2004), both of which have been published only in German. I couldn't find any similarly foundational works on the character in English-language literary studies or other disciplines. While these three monographs originate from the field of cognitive theories, they incorporate many insights from other strands. The first German-language edition of this book in 2008 followed this approach, but attempted to widen the perspective further by integrating findings from different disciplines and specific theories more extensively, and to contribute not only to theory formation, but also to the practice of analysing characters. In a few papers I summarised my approach (Eder 2010b, 2014), and in a small book, I elaborated my position on the definition and ontology of characters (Eder 2008d). Some articles on more specific topics are included in the following overview of recent research.

2.4 The Current State of Research

Since 2008, research on characters has again multiplied and diversified, and the tendencies towards openness, exchange, interdisciplinarity, and integration have further increased. Most publications still deal with specific character types in particular times, works or oeuvres, such as the 'femme fatale in the films of David Lynch' (Beckman 2012). The following survey of recent trends and strands of research concentrates on more comprehensive contributions. Not all of them could be considered in the revision of this book, but they shall at least be acknowledged here.

A few overviews, all from literary studies, summarise key developments of recent research (Jannidis 2013; Comparini 2016). In a special issue of the journal *e-Rea* on *The Persistence of Character*, Marcus Hartner observes that 'a renewed interest in characterisation and the theoretical conceptualisation of fictional beings has entered the academic mainstream' (2024: 3). He refers to some recent influential publications (such as Anderson, Felski, and Moi 2019), but several earlier anthologies already document the increasingly intensive, international, and interdisciplinary discussion. *Characters in Fictional Worlds* (2010), edited by Fotis Jannidis, Ralf Schneider, and me, aimed at strengthening this exchange. The essays by leading researchers examine characters in film, television, novels, poetry, comics, opera, music video, and virtual reality. They deal with diverse aspects of characters, from their ontology, creation, and characterisation to their audiences, transtextuality, and relations to plots and cultural contexts. A German book edited by Rainer Leschke and Henriette Heidbrink (2010) also looks at characters in different arts and media, including, among others,

dance, journalism, pop music, photography, advertising, and video games. *Screening Characters*, edited by Johannes Riis and Aaron Taylor (2019), focuses on characters in screen media and encompasses chapters on medium-specific features, acting, social types, genres, emotional and moral engagement.

Based on such overviews and a review of further literature, some main strands of the current discourse on characters can be identified. On the one hand, the discussion of basic classical questions such as the mode of being, genesis, structural dimensions, aesthetic presentation, and reception of characters is continuously deepening. On the other hand, questions are also being asked for the first time or in new ways. In particular, they relate to the mediality and transmediality of characters, their presence in non-fictional works, their various types, and their social uses and effects.

The study of fundamental questions of ontology, genesis, structures and relations of characters continues unabated. Some books continue the exploration of the relationships between characters and real persons. Cynthia Freeland (2010) analyses relations between 'portraits and persons' in visual arts from a perspective of philosophical aesthetics. John Frow aims at a 'phenomenology of fictive and social personhood, exploring the constitutive categories ... that are common to each' (2014, vii) and emphasises that real persons, like fictional characters, are also often only accessible through representation, imagination, or memory. Other authors focus on general structures of characters and their analysis. Per Krogh Hansen (2012) suggests analysing surface, middle, and depth structures of characters from textual representation to psychological and social traits to ideological values and intertextual relations. Seth Barry Watter distinguishes between 'four ways of looking' at 'the human figure on film': 'natural, pictorial, institutional, and fictional' (2023: 10). My earlier distinction between four dimensions of the character as represented being, artefact, symbol, and symptom (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 of this book) partly overlaps with Hansen's and Watter's categories, but differs from them in crucial respects and is based on a theoretical argument about the constitution and reception of characters. It would be interesting to compare these and earlier multidimensional models, such as that of James Phelan (1989), and assess their consequences for analysis.

Other studies focus less on the general dimensions of characters and more on their media-specific aesthetics. Björn Hochschild (2023), for example, describes the encounter with characters in film and comics in detail from a phenomenological and micro-analytical perspective. Film scholars examine acting (Taylor 2012; Kiss 2019) or the role of editing in the constitution of characters (Brennan and Pearlman 2023). Some focus on characters' bodies, postures, or faces (Schöps 2016; Steimatsky 2017), while others concentrate on representations of their inner life, imaginations, and memories (Alber 2017; Reinerth 2022).

The aesthetic form of characters is, of course, entwined with their experience. Research into the reception of characters and the affective involvement with them has increased so much that the number of publications is now almost impossible

to keep track of. Several publications develop cognitive reception theories further (e.g., Herman 2013). Hartner (2024) describes the development as one ‘from person to construct’, ‘from construct to cognition’, to ‘mental files and fictional minds’, and finally to ‘4E cognition²² and the return of the body’. The increased attention to how readers, viewers, or players respond bodily and affectively to characters and their bodies is reflected in various publications, from studies of mirror neuronal responses in film viewing (Gallese and Guerra 2012) to bodily resonances in ethnographic films (MacDougall 2006) to culture-sensitive reader response models (Vaeßen and Strasen 2021) to immersion and identification processes in Homeric epics (Ready 2023). Concise research surveys on affective responses to characters are available in literary studies (Hillebrandt 2015) and media psychology (Maslej, Quinlan, and Mar 2020). Other overviews turn to particularly prominent topics, such as empathy (Keen 2007, 2013; Eder 2017) or moral appraisal (Grizzard and Eden 2022; Plantinga 2023). Further literature on perceptual and cognitive aspects of character reception is mentioned in Chapter 3, Chapter 5, and Chapter 6, and different positions on characters and affect/emotion are discussed in Chapter 13 and Chapter 14.

In addition to the ongoing engagement with basic questions of the ontology, structure, aesthetics, and reception of characters, some new research trends can also be recognised. A first trend concerns the mediality and transmediality of characters. As the anthologies mentioned above already indicate, the scope of investigation expands beyond the novel and the feature film to include other media. Characters in television series and viewers’ long-term parasocial relationships with them have for some time been the subject of psychological studies. More recently, media scholars have also been making interesting contributions to series characters. For example, Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2015) has contributed a substantial book on engaging with antiheroes and morally questionable characters in TV series. Alberto García (2016) also explores moral emotions, and Jason Mittell (2015: 118–63) discusses characters in ‘complex TV’. While characters in feature films and television series have many similarities and the theory developed in this book can mostly apply to both, video game characters have such special characteristics due to their interactivity that different theoretical approaches are required: after all, you don’t just observe these characters, you direct their actions, actively play with them or against them, often in joint games. After some early articles (e.g., Eder and Thon 2012; Schröter and Thon 2014; Gregersen 2019), some comprehensive monographs on game characters are now available, which I can only refer to here (Blom 2021; Schröter 2021).

A similar development from early preliminary studies to detailed discussions is emerging in the field of transmedia characters, such as Medea or Sherlock Holmes (Thon 2019; Thon and Wilde 2019; Pearson and Thon 2022; Kunz and Wilde 2023). Transmedia characters have been there from early on (for instance, in religious writings,

22 The 4E features of cognition are ‘embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended’.

songs, and visual arts), but they have gained importance in a time of franchises and storyworlds that extend across media. In animation (Eder 2023a) or advertising (Eder 2010a), characters also often appear across various media. Transmedia characters pose a fundamental challenge to theory formation because they raise difficult questions regarding their ontology and origins: to what extent can we still speak of the same characters when they appear in different texts and media and are sometimes ascribed different characteristics there?

The increasing preoccupation in recent years with non-fictional characters poses similarly great challenges, as characters have long been defined by their fictionality and questions of their relationships to real persons now arise in new ways. Most publications centre on documentary films. Carl Plantinga (2018b) outlines basics of characterisation and engagement in documentaries, several publications concentrate on the representation of perpetrators (Eder 2016a; Canet 2024), and Nahuel Ribke (2024) considers documentary filmmakers as characters appearing in their own films. However, non-fictional characters are also discussed under other headings: as ‘global icons’ such as Mother Theresa or Phoolan Devi (Ghosh 2011), as ‘media personae’ in the field of persona studies (which is also the title of a journal, founded in 2015), or in research on politicians and celebrities in the media (e.g., Bondebjerg 2007).

At the same time as the field of research has been expanded to include characters in previously neglected media, transmedia assemblages, and non-fictional texts, the range of types of characters analysed has also widened. The already extensive research on social representation continues to grow, such that only a few major works can be listed here as examples. For example, Cynthia Carter (2012) has published an annotated bibliography on gender and the media; Lea Wohl von Haselberg (2016) provides an overview on Jewish characters in German Film and TV; Ömer Alkin and Alena Strohmeier (2024) have edited the first German-language anthology on racism in film; and Catalin Brylla and Helen Hughes (2017) have produced a volume on disability in documentaries. There are books on the representation of almost any significant social group or role in films and other media, such as on children, mothers, or fathers. The two areas with the largest increase in publications probably concern LGBTQIA+ characters and older people. For example, Erica Joan Dymond and Salvador Jiménez Murguía (2022) give an overview of LGBTQIA+ portrayals in American film, and Hans Jürgen Wulff (2017) has compiled an extensive bibliography on images of age in film and television (a dissertation on this topic will soon be published by Astra Zoldnere).

Two new developments in the field of social representation are, on the one hand, the increase in statistical studies on diversity that are regularly carried out on behalf of organisations such as the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media; the Media, Diversity, and Social Change Initiative at the University of Southern California’s School for Communication and Journalism; the University of California, Los Angeles’ Bunche Center with its Hollywood Diversity Report; Women in Film and Television

UK; GLAAD; or the MaLisa Foundation in Germany (Linke and Prommer 2021). Over the years, these studies have shown some improvements in the situation, but there is still considerable underrepresentation and misrepresentation of many social groups (some chapters in this book will turn to that). The second new development is that media practitioners have begun to respond to such shortcomings. This can be seen, for example, in a noticeable increase in inclusive writing guides that aim for greater diversity of characters (e.g., Salesses 2021; Hay 2022; King 2022; Weinstein 2024).

Characters not only contribute to the representation of social groups, but also to the formation of more general images of humanity, a topic that has regained importance after many years of neglect (Eder 2008c; Eder, Imorde, and Reinerth 2012a; Eder, Imorde, and Zahlmann 2013). This includes images of the (anti-) heroic, the super-, post-, trans-, and non-human as well as of the boundaries and hybridisations between humans, animals, or machines. The fact that several recent publications are dedicated to antiheroes has already been mentioned (e.g., Bruun Vaage 2015; Bröckling 2019). Complementary research on the heroic has also been taken up again, mostly from a critical and political perspective (Drucker and Gumpert 2008; Franco et al. 2016). Not least, this may be linked to the exuberant presence of superheroes in popular culture. Jeffrey A. Brown (2016) already refers to no less than eight book-length studies about superheroes and their relations to geopolitics, nationalism, capitalism, race, and gender, published in English between 2011 and 2016. Superheroes are also considered in terms of their ideological instrumentalisation by states and corporations (Jenkins and Secker 2022). While superheroes are characterised by more-than-human physical or mental abilities, post- and transhuman characters are defined by technological or genetic changes to the human body or mind (of course, the two can coincide). There are also several publications on such characters, mainly in film and other audiovisual media (Eder 2013; Hauskeller, Philbeck, and Carbonell 2015). Apart from a few precursors (Marchesini and Andersen 2001), animal characters, human-animal hybrids, and non-human imaginary figures have been little studied to date, but this area has recently been explored in detail by a dissertation by Zoe Wibl  (2024). Despite the long history of theological hermeneutics, the systematic theorisation of religious and supernatural characters, or more particularly of ‘God as a character’, is still in its infancy (Eisen and M llner 2016). Taken together, these works provide new insights into how media and their characters constitute cultural images of the human, its limits, the non-human, and the supernatural.

Finally, a further research trend can be recognised which (going beyond relevant research in media psychology) provides new impulses for understanding the social uses and effects of characters. Both literary and film studies are increasingly turning their attention to the influence of characters on social interactions with real people. Blakey Vermeule (2010), for example, considers literature as a training ground for social life in reality, Suzanne Keen (2007, 2013) critically examines its suitability for

strengthening empathy, and several contributors to the anthology *Fictional Characters, Real Problems* (2016), edited by Garry L. Hagberg, dedicate themselves to the ethical functions of literary characters. Several theories of ethics and morality in film also deal with characters in a central position (Stadler 2008; Moss-Wellington 2019; Plantinga 2023). With a focus on concrete practices, social scientists examine the use of characters in political storytelling (Polletta 2015), risk communication (Shanahan et al. 2019), or social movements (Jasper, Young, and Zuern 2018). In a groundbreaking book, Catalin Brylla (2023) brings together film studies and social sciences to explain how representations of characters in documentary films can be used to combat discriminatory social stereotypes.

The greatest social impact of characters is probably achieved cumulatively when certain types and relations of characters are repeated and condensed in influential discourses. In order to determine this, approaches from the digital humanities, 'distant reading', and the computer-aided analysis of larger corpora of texts and characters (soon, presumably, using artificial intelligence) can help to determine 'character networks' and other relevant structures in the future (e.g., Labatut and Bost 2019). However, a systematic link between the corpus analyses and aesthetic, critical, or discourse-theoretical perspectives has yet to be established.

To briefly summarise the most important results: the research overview shows that until the beginning of the twentieth century, characters were discussed almost exclusively from a prescriptive perspective, especially in the poetics of drama and the novel. Thereafter, various descriptive theories developed, especially in literature, film and media studies, but also in philosophy, sociology, and psychology. Most of them focus narrowly on certain kinds or aspects of characters in particular media, only a few take a more general and comprehensive perspective. Moreover, most character theories are based on fundamentally different and competing approaches, especially hermeneutics, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and cognitive science, between which there was little exchange for a long time. Each of these approaches is internally complex and changes over time; for instance, the strand of cognitive theories has developed from universal to sociocultural views and from computer models of the mind to 4E cognition, affect, and bodily experience. Since the 1990s and even more so after 2008, a proliferation and specialisation of theories can be observed, as well as their incipient exchange and integration.

The research overview indicates that the study of characters should not be confined to one discipline, one medium, or one art form. Film and literary studies in particular, but also theatre and communication studies, philosophy, psychology, and sociology often produce complementary work and can learn a lot from each other. In view of this situation of polyphony, the most urgent task of theory formation at present is to build a network of connections between the most important findings of different theories, a sort of argumentative infrastructure. What is required is thus a threefold project of integration and triangulation. Firstly, the results of research on different

topics—from the ontology to the typology of characters—must be linked with each other. Secondly, it will be necessary to combine studies from diverse disciplines. And thirdly, competing approaches must be compared and evaluated in order to exchange arguments and insights. Connections and comparisons, checks and modifications, rejections and supplementations of research results may then lead to new and more adequate theories.²³

This book is an attempt towards such an integrative and transdisciplinary theory of characters. It will have to make numerous compromises. Because of the sheer amount of the literature in different languages and disciplines, I often focus only on their central systematic contributions. As far as disciplines beyond film and literary studies are concerned, I often trust largely consensual presentations in handbooks or research surveys of the respective fields. In order to adapt results from different theories, I usually interpret their concepts and claims in the most open and compatible way possible. In the process, it will be important to aim at consistency in the overarching goals and at a meta-theoretical level.

The project of an integrative theory of character faces two fundamental challenges: the complexity of the subject matter and the methodological difficulties resulting from transdisciplinarity and theoretical diversity. Hopefully, the risks of superficiality, eclecticism, and inconsistency may be kept within limits in the following way. For one, the complexity of characters as an object of study requires a deductive procedure. The multiplicity of existing film characters is immeasurable. Complex protagonists exist alongside marginal characters, three-dimensional protagonists alongside flat stereotypes, characters embodied by actors alongside animated figures, the enigmatic characters of the avant-garde alongside blockbuster superheroes. The means of characterisation are equally diverse, whether language, images, sound, or bodily performance. In view of this multiplicity, it is obvious that a theory of character cannot be inductively inferred from particular examples. Instead, one must begin by developing general hypotheses and a consistent system of concepts, which can then be tested on concrete examples and improved step-by-step.

The most pressing task at the moment is to prepare the foundations for further investigations. It is therefore advisable to concentrate on the most basic steps of theory formation and to fill the biggest gaps. Further questions as to the relationships between characters and images of humanity, culture, and society, as well as character typologies, can here only be dealt with in an all too fragmentary way. They are among the most interesting aspects of characters but also the most complex in terms of their premises. Own empirical investigations of characters and their reception will also be mostly excluded, but the book may hopefully contribute to a theoretical basis for formulating

23 Other authors share my view that various film and media theories are fundamentally compatible and that many of their results can be combined. They discuss the justification for this assumption and the corresponding possibilities more generally and, in some cases, in greater detail; see, for example, Bacon 2005 on synthesising film theories or Yacavone 2015 on theorising ‘film worlds’.

suitable hypotheses for empirical research. The problem of the hyper-complexity of an integrative theory of characters can thus be mitigated by a deductive procedure and some limitations of content; the results will need open and critical discussion anyway.

The second problem, the question of the appropriate theoretical basis and methodology, cannot be solved by an eclectic smorgasbord of approaches because the existing positions contradict each other on so many fundamental points. It is therefore necessary to decide on a particular theoretical basis and to examine which results of other approaches can be adopted in a complementary way. To do that, I will often bring controversial terms and theses into a modified, more open, and flexible form in order to make them compatible.

The development of my theoretical foundation is guided by the following goals: it should be able to explain the relationships of characters to both persons and texts. In doing so, it should cover the entire spectrum of characters, but also be able to do justice to the particularities of characters in certain media, times, and cultures. Moreover, the theory should fulfil some further criteria (see Margolin 1990: 843f.): it should stand on a solid conceptual foundation and do justice to pre-theoretical intuitions as far as possible. It should go beyond a mere taxonomy of forms of characters to explain their causes and conditions of constitution. And finally, an empirical operationalisation of the theory should be possible. As I will argue, recent cognitive media theories are most likely to fulfil these criteria, provided they are applied in an open and undogmatic way. Probably for this reason, much of the recent work on character is based on cognitivist foundations. This, however, does not diminish the insights from other theoretical approaches, which are often very useful or even urgently needed. In the following chapters, I will attempt to develop a theoretical basis that meets the above criteria.

3. What Are Characters, How Are They Created and Experienced? (T)

3.1 Definition and Ontology: What Are Characters?

This chapter will be rather abstract and theoretical; it could be skipped by readers who are more interested in practical matters of character analysis. Nevertheless, it is necessary for the following argument to clarify fundamentally what characters actually are.¹ This question may seem strange. After all, characters are part of our daily lives, and we deal with them intuitively. We have no problem talking about them, and everybody can even invent their own characters and should, therefore, know first-hand what they are like. This presumed familiarity, however, gives way to a whole series of difficult questions on closer examination. How can I define 'character' precisely? What kind of objects are characters if they do not exist in reality? How can we share their feelings and thoughts although they are not real? What features do they have and how do they originate? How are they related to media texts, to human imagination and communication? The answers to these questions determine the way in which characters are analysed, as a look at the various possible statements in common analytical practices shows. We talk about characters in very different ways. For example, even simple statements about Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* assign him quite heterogeneous attributes:²

- Social, physical, and mental features: Rick is the owner of the most popular bar in Casablanca. He has dark hair, is of medium height, around forty, and has an expressive face. A disillusioned idealist, he is cynical, relaxed, sentimental, clever, bold, sensitive, and controlled.
- Relationships with other characters and events in the story: Rick loves the resistance fighter Ilsa Lund; he saves her and her husband from the Nazis.

1 This question is discussed more extensively in Eder 2008d and in philosophical works such as Abell 2020, Reicher 1998, or Thomasson 2003. Moreover, characters can be considered as elements of fictional worlds, storyworlds, or 'film worlds', which have been examined from different perspectives by authors such as Ryan 1991, 2003; Doležel 1998; or more recently Yacavone 2015.

2 More elaborate examples illustrating the following statements can be found in Holm 2002; Riis 2002; Nielsen 2002; Kau 2002; and Caviglia 2002.

- Relationships with medial means of presentation: Rick is played by Humphrey Bogart. Framing techniques frequently focus the attention upon him, and the camera often shows him in close-ups.
- Overall forms and functions of the presentation: Rick is portrayed in a differentiated way as an individualised type. As the protagonist, he pushes the action forward.
- Reception and affective potential: Rick is an easily comprehensible character that elicits affection and compassion and whose secrets make him fascinating. Sometimes we even share his memories.
- Comparisons with real persons and characters in other texts: Rick appears to be taller than the actor Bogart actually was. He is parodied or quoted in many other films.
- Larger meanings: Rick stands for a 'typically American' combination of sentiment and pragmatism, apparent cynicism, and hidden idealism.
- Typologies, contexts of historical genres, and mentalities: Rick embodies an ideal of masculinity of his period along with features of typical heroes of Westerns and gangster movies.
- Sociocultural functions and influences: the filmmakers intended Rick to be seen as a model American who abandons his isolationist stance and supports the war against Nazi Germany. His ways of behaving and speaking were imitated repeatedly.³

The survey in the previous chapter shows that each theory of characters favours different sets of the above features while neglecting others, depending on their definition of character. If characters are regarded as human-like entities, their personality traits will be the prime topic of investigation. If they are viewed as components of a text, the focus will be on structures of presentation. If they are assumed to be mental constructs, a psychological approach to reception will be applied.

The spectrum of common definitions admits all of these possibilities. Most frequently, the character is defined as an equivalent to a real person or a 'fictional analogue of a human agent' (Smith 1995: 17).⁴ At the opposite pole are structuralist

3 On the political significance of *Casablanca*, see Pontuso 2005. Rick is the earliest movie hero to be included in the popularity survey of the British magazine *Total Film* (see <https://web.archive.org/web/20201220113738/https://edition.cnn.com/2001/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/26/indiana.hero/>).

4 Further examples: 'a represented person that corresponds by analogy to our understanding of personhood in real life without being confused with reality' (Michaels 1998: 4). '[...] "character" or "person" in narrative will be understood as designating a human or human-like individual, existing in some possible world, and capable of fulfilling the argument position in the propositional form DO(X)—that is, a Narrative Agent (=NA), to whom inner states, mental properties (traits, features) or complexes of such properties (personality models) can be ascribed on the basis of textual data' (Margolin 1986: 205). See also Asmuth 1997a.

notions that specify the character as a sign constellation, a bundle of textual functions, or a 'paradigm of traits' (Chatman 1978: 107ff.).⁵ The definitions are so antagonistic that one can neither presuppose some intuitive understanding nor simply accept one of the definitions, since most of them prove to be problematical. The divergence of character conceptions has led to numerous misunderstandings and a lack of exchange between theories. However, it is also not helpful to leave the concept of character completely open, because it needs to be clarified if different theories are to be systematically linked.⁶

A look at current character definitions reveals three central areas that need to be clarified: firstly, the anthropomorphic quality of characters, secondly, their ontological status and, thirdly, their relationship to neighbouring concepts like role, star, or actant.

The most widespread definitions correspond to the scheme 'a character is a fictional human being', but this is obviously too narrow, because the spectrum of characters also includes animals, aliens, gods, ghosts, robots, monsters, magical, or other non-human beings. Although most characters exhibit human traits, they can also differ significantly from humans in their mode of existence, physicality, sociality, or mental capacity, and their significance can lie precisely in questioning the criteria of being human. Even definitions that understand characters not as human persons, but more generally as beings capable of acting or taking action, are still too narrow, as some characters can also remain completely passive or immobile and only undergo mental processes.

However, there is one decisive feature (and also one decisive prerequisite for action) that is in fact common to all characters: they possess an—at least rudimentary—inner life and the capability of relating to objects with their conscious minds, for instance, to perceive, feel, or desire something. In the philosophy of mind, this ability to mentally represent objects is called intentionality. While in everyday life 'intentionality' generally refers to deliberate or purposeful action, in philosophy the term is used in the broader sense of the directedness of something at something (Searle 1983, 2004: Chapter 6) or 'the power of minds and mental states to be about, to represent, or to stand for, things, properties and states of affairs' (Jacob 2019). Furthermore, for a fictional being with the capacity for intentionality to be called a character, it must be recognisable. Extras whizzing by in the background or merging into crowds will not usually be considered characters. A first working definition might therefore be:

5 E.g., Manfred Pfister attempts to specify a character as the sum of its structural functions in the changing and stabilisation of situations, and the moral quality or identity of a character as the sum of the relations of correspondence and contrast with the other characters of a text (Pfister 1988: 224). This recursive definition does not hold up against a logical examination because its definiens already presupposes the concept of character. Besides, character is defined solely through action although characters can also be construed independently of actions.

6 Thus Göran Nieragden (1995), for example, evades any definition of his own. Taylor and Tröhler (1999) do so, too, and conceive of character as a 'Facetten-Konglomerat [conglomerate of facets]' that may be defined by different aspects, none of which is necessarily present (Taylor and Tröhler 1999: 149; cf. also Tröhler 2007 and Taylor 2002: 13).

A character is a recognisable represented being with an inner life—more precisely: with the ascribed capacity of mental intentionality.

This definition is somewhat broader than in earlier editions of this book because it replaces ‘fictional beings’ with ‘represented beings’. In this way, the definition also includes characters from documentary film or other non-fictional media. Nevertheless, it makes sense to first look at the more widely discussed (and more ontologically difficult) standard case of fictional characters here, of intentional beings that are represented in fictional media such as feature films.

So, what are fictional beings, what is their ontological status? In analytical philosophy all those objects are considered fictional that are represented by fictional textual utterances (Künne 1983: 291ff.; the German original differentiates more precisely between ‘fictitious’ [fiktiven] objects and ‘fictional’ [fiktionalen] texts, but this does not translate well into English). Fictional are all those descriptive texts for which their producers do not claim that the described objects really exist or that these objects really possess the properties ascribed to them (see Gabriel 1975; Searle 1979). Rick Blaine is therefore fictional because the movie *Casablanca* never asserted that he really existed. And the characters of historical feature films like Cleopatra or Napoleon are fictional because their makers do not insist that their real counterparts actually possessed exactly the same properties, the same looks and lives, as the actors or animated figures representing them in the film.

Thus, characters are marked as fictional by certain communicative contexts and media practices and as non-fictional by others. Viewers expect documentary films and other non-fictional media to correspond to reality, and their claims to concrete factual truth can even lead to legal disputes, for example over defamation. Fictional films, on the other hand, are seen as games of the imagination, inviting viewers to imagine worlds which, as the credits often emphasise, are ‘free inventions’ and in which any resemblance between their inhabitants and real people is ‘purely coincidental’. Between fiction films and documentaries there are hybrid forms such as docudramas, reenactments or autofictions, whose degree of fictionality must be assessed in each case.⁷ This definition of fictionality, which is pragmatic, context-dependent, and allows for differences of degree, applies not only to characters, but also to everything else in fictional communication, to entire fictional worlds.

A simple answer to the question of the ontology of characters might therefore be to define them as elements of such fictional worlds and refer further clarification to fictional worlds theories in literature and media studies.⁸ Here, a fictional world is understood as a system of non-real, possible states-of-affairs, as a framework of

7 On the problematic character of such statements see Tröhler 2002; I prefer a theory of fiction more strongly anchored in the pragmatics of texts than in textual structures.

8 Cf. Eco 1998; Ryan 1991 and 2003; Doležel 1998; Pavel 1986; Ronen 1994; Buckland 1999; Yacavone 2015. See also the instructive surveys by Martinez and Scheffel 1999: 123–34 and Surkamp 2002.

objects, individuals, space and time, events, laws, etc. that is construed by a fictional text (Doležel 1998: 16–23; Ryan 2001: 91). This reference to fictional worlds, however, cannot solve our problem. To specify fictional worlds ontologically, scholars refer to philosophical theories of possible worlds, which are themselves completely at odds regarding their ontology.⁹ Theories of fictional or possible worlds thus cannot provide any clarification of the mode of existence of characters, because they are themselves battling with equally massive ontological problems.

As the scholarly discourse on characters is older and richer than the one on fictional worlds, it is advisable to make it the point of departure. The four central positions on the ontological status of fictional characters are extremely controversial.¹⁰ (1) Semiotic theories consider characters as sign constellations or textual structures.¹¹ (2) Cognitive approaches assume that they are conceptions of imaginary beings in the minds of viewers.¹² (3) Some philosophers believe that characters are abstract objects existing beyond material reality.¹³ (4) Others again think that they do not exist at all.¹⁴ There are also attempts to connect some of these assumptions with each other.¹⁵ Such considerations may seem unnecessarily abstract and dispensable, but they are not, because each position has far-reaching consequences for the practice of analysing characters. Those who view characters as textual structures will primarily examine the media text. Those who view characters as mental constructs, on the other hand, will focus instead on the audience's reception processes. And if characters are abstract objects or if they do not exist at all, then the question arises as to what one is actually analysing and talking about. Every definition thus entails a particular perspective and methodology. The pros and cons of the different positions cannot be dealt with in detail here, but I shall at least sketch out a few of the essential arguments.¹⁶

The assumption that characters are 'signs' leads to problems, whichever of the meanings of this word is selected. Fundamentally, three different meanings of 'sign' may be

9 A survey of philosophical positions on the ontology of possible worlds is offered by Melia 2000.

10 Introductions to the philosophical debate are Proudfoot 1992; Howell 1998; Lamarque 1998. On the discussion within literary theory cf. Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 31–34; Margolin 1990a, 1990b, and 1995; the most detailed treatment is Jannidis 2004: Chapter 5. The problem of fictional objects is, of course, also of central significance for fictional worlds theories (Doležel 1998: 1–30).

11 Cf. Branigan 1984: 12 ('surface feature of discourse'); Wulff 1997: 1 [French ed.: 32]; and Jannidis' critique of (post-)structuralist variants of this position (2004: Chapter 5).

12 See in the psychological theory of literature Grabes 1978; Schneider 2000; Culpeper 2000; Gerrig and Allbritton 1990; and the critique in Jannidis 2004: 177–184. In the area of film theory, no comparably explicit version of this proposition is known to me although it seems to be suggested by numerous approaches, e.g., Bordwell 1992; Ohler 1994; Grodal 1999; or Persson 2003.

13 Thomasson 2003 and Reicher 1998; cf. also Howell 1998 and Lamarque 1998.

14 Künne 1983: 291–322; Currie 1990; cf. also Proudfoot 1992; Howell 1998; Lamarque 1998.

15 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, for instance, assumes that characters have an ontological double structure as nodal points in a text and abstractions in the story (1996: 33; cf. also 29ff.).

16 A more detailed presentation of my argumentation is Eder 2008d. I agree with Jannidis's (2004: Chapter 5) critique of the conception of characters as signs and as subjective mental models, as well as with the argumentation by Thomasson 2003 or Reicher 1998 for considering characters as a particular kind of abstract object.

distinguished: as a thing standing for something else, as a physical carrier of signification, and as a relation, for instance between a signifier (expression) and a signified (content). Now characters may often stand for something else and thus function as secondary signs (e.g., as an allegory). But this is only a functional specification, not an ontological one. Ontologically, characters cannot be equated with any dyadic or triadic sign relation according to de Saussure or Peirce.¹⁷ It appears to be counterintuitive that they should be abstract relations between signifiers and signifieds or between sign carriers, referential objects, and interpretants, especially since the question of how to define each of these relata would lead to great difficulties.¹⁸ Could they be one of these relata? Certainly not the material sign carriers, because we speak differently about characters and concrete textual structures. In contrast to 'Rick Blaine has dark hair', the sentence 'Rick is this set of images and sounds' sounds strange. More importantly, characters may exist apart from their original text and its specific set of signs: after all, film characters can also appear in other films, novels, or computer games. Characters therefore seem to be a complex meaning of signs rather than these signs themselves.

However, this meaning cannot consist in the individual conception of a character formed by a particular viewer as suggested by psychological approaches (e.g., Persson 2003; Schneider 2000). The subjective conceptions or mental models of Rick Blaine formed by different viewers of *Casablanca* will certainly diverge from each other. They are not the same, neither numerically nor qualitatively, and they change during the film. The character Rick Blaine, however, remains the same (although Rick's personality changes). Viewers may even admit that they have formed a wrong picture of Rick. This suggests that particular norms determine when an individual mental representation of a character is 'right' and corresponds to the actual character. If characters are based on normative assumptions and abstractions, however, which are derived from an analytical perspective, then a character cannot even be an abstract type of mental representations. For a type in the sense of a mere generalisation based on the mental models of different viewers—i.e., based on what remains the same with these viewers—would no longer be normative but descriptive.

The comparison with ideas or texts representing real beings also contradicts the notion that characters are mental representations of viewers or complexes of signs. Neither a television programme about the former Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel nor the image that I as a viewer create of her are identical with Merkel herself. Fictional media do not correspond completely to this pattern, as characters do not exist like persons in material reality. But the analogy supports the assumption that signs and ideas are only external or internal representations of characters, not the characters themselves. We can say that Rick is portrayed by Bogart in certain sequences of the film *Casablanca* and that we have formed an idea of Rick on this basis, but we cannot meaningfully claim that the film sequences with Bogart or our individual ideas are identical with Rick. So, the provisional conclusion is:

17 On dyadic and triadic sign models, see Nöth 2000: 137–41.

18 For more on that, see my small book *Was sind Figuren?* (2008d).

Characters must be distinguished from their mental and textual (medial) representations, even if they are based on them.

Since the concept of representation is often misunderstood, I would like to emphasise again that representations are obviously not to be understood as abstract propositions here, but as mental or medial entities with a material basis. Mental representations or ideas of a certain character develop in the minds of the audience through various mental processes. Textual (medial) representations of characters, again, include all those textual elements that contribute essentially to those mental processes by evoking or influencing ideas of characters: images of the character's body, dialogues about their personality, or musical leitmotifs recalling the character. Both mental and textual representations are clearly necessary for the genesis of characters, but they are not identical with them.

Thus, the question of what characters really are arises again. Or do characters really not exist at all and talking about them is merely the result of a linguistic illusion? Some philosophers assume that all statements about characters are ultimately either statements about texts or about mental representations (e.g., Künne 1983: 310–14; Currie 1990: 158–62). 'Rick Blaine loves Ilsa' would then mean: 'According to the film *Casablanca*, Rick loves Ilsa' or '*Casablanca* triggers the idea that Rick loves Ilsa'. Whenever we believe to be analysing characters, we would in reality be examining external or internal representations although it would still remain unclear in what form this might happen. In addition, not all utterances are so easy to resolve. How could we, for instance, transform the following sentence: 'Rick Blaine is a multidimensional character invented by Murray Burnett, played by Humphrey Bogart, often shown in close-up shots, meeting an ideal of masculinity of his period, therefore re-emerging in several film parodies'? Here a simple introductory formula like 'according to *Casablanca*' is obviously not sufficient. The attempts at a reformulation of such complex statements in logical language by analytical philosophers therefore result in almost endless sentences twisted into something like a Gordian knot (for examples of that, see Currie 1990: 171–80).

There is, however, an alternative that will do justice both to practical character analysis and the intuition that we do in fact talk about characters. It consists in conceiving of characters as abstract social objects, as for example in Amie L. Thomasson's 'artefact theory' of fiction (2003). According to this theory, characters are comparable to laws, theories, or works of art: they are cultural artefacts created by textual utterances. Characters are abstract because they can neither be handled materially nor located spatio-temporally; they still are, however, contingent elements of our real world that originated at a particular point in time. Similar views are held by scholars with varying backgrounds.¹⁹ My own version of the proposition in the German first edition

¹⁹ See, for instance, Maria Reicher's concept of fictional objects as logical parts of the world layers of representational works (1998: 295); Roman Ingarden's 'abgeleitet rein intentionale, durch

of this book was: fictional beings are communicative artefacts that are created by the intersubjective construction of mental representations of certain beings on the basis of fictional texts. However, this proposition (developed in more detail in Eder 2008d) can be broadened to cover also non-fictional characters of documentaries or other non-fictional media (see Eder 2014, 2016; Plantinga 2018b):

Represented beings are communicative artefacts that are created by the intersubjective construction of mental representations of certain beings on the basis of texts.

As mentioned before, ‘texts’ are understood here as complex but coherent sign utterances or units of communication that are based on and shaped by the material, sensory, semiotic, and pragmatic specificity of certain media. For instance, filmic texts are shaped by the specific affordances of moving images and sound used as predominantly iconic signs in the pragmatic contexts of cinema.

Thus, characters do exist, but they are neither signs in the text nor subjective ideas in people’s heads. They are abstract objects created through communicative practice and are in this way made part of an objective social reality—like numbers, laws, theories, or money. Karl Popper’s philosophical ‘three worlds theory’ would assign them neither to world one of the physical-concrete nor to world two of the subjective-mental, but to world three, the world of objective cultural contents that exist independently of individual minds (cf. Popper 1972: 153–90). This position can best be made clear by showing how characters originate. The clarification will, at the same time, provide indications of how character analysis should proceed properly and how different theories of character could be combined with each other. In the following, I will focus on fictional characters in feature films. But it should be noted that most of what I will say about them could also be applied to non-fictional characters or to characters in other media.

3.2 Communication and Meaning: How Do Characters Originate?

Characters are created through communication: through interactions in which texts are produced and received in order to influence mental states such as thoughts and feelings, and through these often also behaviour.²⁰ To put it more precisely, characters

Bedeutungseinheiten entworfene Gegenständlichkeiten [derivative purely intentional objects designed through units of meaning]’ (Ingarden 1972: 230; quoted from Reicher 1998: 295); Peter van Inwagen’s ‘theoretical entities of literary criticism’ (see Howell 1998; Lamarque 1998); Umberto Eco’s ‘formal individuals’ (2000: 243–45); or Uri Margolin’s ‘*entiae rationis*’ (1990b: 847). There are also connecting points with Jannidis’s conception of a character as the mental model of a model reader (2004: 252).

20 The approach I outline briefly in the following seems to correspond in many respects to Catharine

appear in two very different forms of communication: representational and meta-representational communication. Representational communication presents certain real or invented worlds and objects, while meta-representational communication (or simply meta-communication) focuses on the processes and results of representational communication. This is most evident in the field of fiction. Fictional characters appear in fictional and meta-fictional communication.²¹ On the fictional level, feature films are produced and viewed. The films serve as an invitation to imagine, as tools to evoke ideas and feelings about invented worlds in the viewers and to let them experience these worlds. Some of the film structures are character representations, intended to induce intersubjective processes of character reception. In this way, fictional communication forms the basis of characters that may subsequently, on the level of meta-fictional communication, become the subject of conversations between viewers, of advertising, criticism, analysis, and interpretation. Usually, it is only at this stage that assertions about characters are made, that they are, for instance, said to be stereotypical or differentiated. Fictional characters are thus constituted through fictional communication and then become objects of meta-fictional communication. Or more generally, if we want to include not only fictional but also non-fictional characters: all characters are constituted through representational communication and then become objects of meta-representational communication.

I shall begin with the first level. The essential prerequisites for the emergence of characters are:

- producers and recipients who form ideas of characters;
- a text that includes semiotic representations of characters;
- a practical context of representational communication; and
- collective mental dispositions and communicative rules.

The genesis of film characters starts when filmmakers begin to develop ideas of the beings they want to portray—usually in a collective process in which writers, directors, actors, and other members of a film team exchange their individual ideas about a character and shape the film with the intention of evoking similar character conceptions and mental processes in the imagined audience. This kind of intended character reception will affect the film's creation in a mostly intuitive way. For example, dialogues will be rewritten, actors cast, or failed scenes removed to achieve the desired effects. When the film is finished, it is distributed, with peri- and paratexts such as

Abell's later and much more detailed institutionalist theory of fiction (Abell 2020). I distance myself from a non-intentional notion of communication (e.g., Nöth 2000: 235–47) and take up, in particular, suggestions by Schützeichel 2004, Schmidt 1991, and Vogel 2001. A detailed description of the communicative construction of characters is given by Jannidis 2004; it leads to somewhat different conclusions than my own.

21 In the case of non-fictional characters, we could more generally speak of 'mimetic' and 'meta-mimetic' or 'representational' and 'meta-representational' communication.

posters, trailers, or press announcements designed to give the audience a preliminary idea of the characters.

Production and distribution of the film make up the first large part of the communicative context; the second part consists in the film's reception and appropriation. Viewers act in selecting the film, watching it, in various places, at varying times, and for various motives. They need not be the targeted audience, nor need the film trigger the expected reception. The filmmakers may want to enlighten the spectators may prefer to be entertained. They often use the text in ways that diverge from the planners' intentions, make it function differently. Besides, people of different age or gender, and members of different cultures, groups, and milieus, may experience the film in different ways. The character conceptions, imaginations, and evaluations of various viewers may thus differ from one another and from the intentions of the filmmakers.

At a basic level of understanding, however, audience reactions will most often be fairly similar. Even people who perceive, understand and evaluate Rick Blaine differently—who, for instance, admire him or take him to be a self-pitying macho—will still generally agree about his bodily features and actions. For most viewers, the film will evoke processes of character reception that are in many ways similar to those intended. Such intersubjective effects of the representations of characters are fundamentally conditioned by collective mental dispositions ranging from innate modes of reaction to culturally and media specific knowledge (Persson 2003: 8–13). Whenever spectators respond to a film and filmmakers attempt to anticipate their responses, they do so on the grounds of physical and mental preconditions with individual variations but also common biological foundations, cultural influences, shared experiences, and comparable reception situations. Some of these dispositions, such as folk psychology or social categories and stereotypes, are particularly relevant for character reception (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 6).

The similarities between the mental dispositions of producers and recipients are not merely a matter of coincidence, nor do they automatically lead to similar reception processes. Instead, the context of communicative action correlates them with each other, and they are intentionally brought into correspondence.²² Filmmakers and film viewers in this way mutually generate certain facts of a social reality, including films with an intersubjective meaning; communication forms like the feature film; categories and genres; the institution of the cinema. All these are 'observer-dependent' facts (Searle 2001: Chapter 5) that would not exist without a conventional agreement between the participants—in contradistinction to the objects of the natural sciences (at least to realist theories of science). They arise in intersubjective frameworks of action through collective intentionality and the attribution of functions by means of constitutive rules (cf. Searle 2001: 139–51).

22 Various conceptions of the processes involved are described by Schützeichel 2004.

Collective intentionality means here that filmmakers and spectators pursue common goals on the basis of shared presuppositions that include very general mutual expectations: the screening of the film is intended to trigger mental processes, among them the imagination and experience of invented worlds and characters. The material object film, a succession of images and sounds, is thus collectively assigned this function. Some theorists speak of a 'communicative contract', an implicit agreement between filmmakers and spectators (Casetti 2001; Wulff 2001c). Genres, star systems, posters, or trailers promise the spectators experiences with particular gratifications, among them information, orientation, and learning; entertainment, relaxation, and emotional stimulation; development of personal identity; social integration and interaction (cf. Schramm and Hasebrink 2004: 472). This kind of communicative contract is linked to specific sanctions: filmmakers must be prepared to tolerate bad criticism, and spectators can be accused of having failed to understand the film correctly. The contract also implies that the promises of gratification will be kept as long as the spectators orient themselves by the reception as intended by the filmmakers. This is only an offer and not a command: the spectators are free to view the film in different ways and ignore the filmmakers' intentions. But then they cannot hold the filmmakers responsible if the gratification is not delivered. It is therefore part of the implicit contract that viewers try to comply with the intended reception at least in some sort of indirect way.

The possibility of approximating the intended reception and both the differences and the commonalities of reception processes are essentially grounded in the complex spectrum of physical and mental properties of the spectators, which extend from biological or bodily tendencies toward certain reactions to culturally and individually specific sets of knowledge and affect, biases and preferences. To a certain extent, universal dispositions such as innate systems of perception and affect automatically lead the spectators to experience the intended reaction, for instance that they recognise represented beings correctly. On this basis of automatic perceptual tendencies, a further network of more complex, higher-level processes of understanding comes into play, often concerning that which is not directly perceptible: What is the character planning to do, what is its moral quality, what does it symbolise, is its representation meant to be ironical? Processes of this kind require implicit knowledge and spontaneous inferences on the basis of communicative rules. Some of these rules are constitutive rules of the form: X in context K means Y (Searle 2001: 148). Whenever a person makes certain noises with their mouths, then this is taken to be a promise of marriage in our culture; whenever lovers switch off the lights in an old Hollywood film, they are probably going to have sex; whenever a cartoon character is shown with dollar signs in place of its eyes, it is meant to be greedy. However, such cultural rules, conventions, schemata, or codes (terminologies vary here) in no way uniquely determine the reception process; they are only points of orientation that may suggest associations or help make the intended reception comprehensible through inferences. Thereby spectators primarily draw on stocks of knowledge that are easily accessible and appear most relevant.

The communicative context plays a role in determining which areas of knowledge are used. Among the foundations are some general principles of communication, for instance the assumption that the film was made so as to serve particular purposes of the communication situation (e.g., entertainment, information).²³ The mutual recognition and consideration of the given communicative contexts and prerequisites takes place on the basis of communication rules. The filmmakers try to anticipate the reactions of their audiences; the spectators try to comprehend the intentions of the filmmakers. Depending on the kind of film communication, the responsibility may be shifted: producers of mainstream films try to please their target audiences as far as possible, so these audiences can expect to be 'served' without having to bother about the intentions of the producers. Conversely, the spectators of complex auteur films are conventionally expected to use knowledge about the filmmakers and their situation in order to understand the films. Thus, special features of film communication and its different forms must be taken into account, including that filmmakers and spectators are not in direct contact; that a film must not be seen only as a message but also as a commodity, a toy, an instrument of the senses; that the levels of narration and meaning of a film can be multifaceted; and that indirect meanings and sensory processes often play a central role (metaphor, irony, aesthetic experience). Fictional communication, as a rule, is more complex and open in its meaning than direct instrumental everyday communication; it is also split into different forms and practices. Generally, the activities of making or understanding fiction are also subject to communicative goals, norms, and conventions. They are geared to fulfil particular functions and therefore expected to meet collective dispositions and communicative rules to do so. This is the foundation for the constitution of characters as intersubjective objects.

A more precise understanding can be achieved by considering meta-fictional or meta-representational communication. In this context, characters are the prime object of debates between spectators, filmmakers, critics, interpreters, and censors. All the aspects of representational communication are dealt with: one may discuss the filmic means used to depict Rick in *Casablanca*, how Rick should be understood from the point of view of the filmmakers, how spectators actually reacted to him or might hypothetically respond to him. Beyond the responses of individual viewers, one may try to explore group-specific responses: How do men or women, Americans or Moroccans, perceive Rick at a certain point in time?

In all these cases one, makes essentially empirical hypotheses about the actual, probable, or intended reception of characters by individuals or social groups. Empirical statements of this kind play a role in film creation in order to gauge the future character reception (for example, in test screenings), and in sociocultural analyses in order to assess the effects of characters (for example, in youth protection committees). They may be supported by production and reception data, such as audience surveys, focus

23 On communicative principles of cooperation, cf. Casetti 2001; Jannidis 2004: 52–60; Schmidt 1991; Wulff 2001c.

groups, or interviews with filmmakers. When available, they may provide decisive arguments for or against the asserted form of character reception.

Other statements about characters cannot be confirmed empirically, but need to be made plausible in other ways. Especially in film interpretation and criticism, one may encounter propositions that are openly or covertly normative or evaluative: character representations are supposed to have been understood ‘correctly’ or ‘wrongly’; certain interpretations are called ‘better’, ‘more adequate’, or ‘more interesting’ than others. Such statements obviously measure the actual reception of characters against certain ideals. But what are those ideals and what standards apply? In other words, what could be a basis for an intersubjectively valid meaning of representations of characters? Three criteria are most often mentioned: the rules of communication, the intentions of the producers, and the interests of the recipients (cf. Jannidis et al. 2003).

A first criterion of ideal character reception could be its optimal correspondence with communicative rules and other collective dispositions. However, this would often leave the reception more or less open; it would furthermore raise the question as to what dispositions and rules are relevant in a given case. After all, there may be great differences between the dispositions and rules of different times and cultures—and thus between filmmakers and spectators. The intentions of filmmakers might be used as an additional or alternative criterion. Author-intentional theories of meaning assume that the ideal reception matches the reception intended by the creators; character representations should then be understood as the authors explicitly intended or implicitly presupposed them to be. Other positions, by contrast, emphasise the legitimate interests of the spectators: perhaps it is more interesting, entertaining, or enlightening to understand character representations in ways different than the producers intended.

The position taken here is that not one of these criteria is in itself sufficient to determine the ideal character reception, but that all three must be taken into account.²⁴ This is already implied by the framework of communicative action and its aims. Communicative action is ideally successful precisely when the interests of all participants, the communicators as well as the recipients, are optimally satisfied according to the given communicative rules. This would be the case when the viewers, due to their communicative competence, fully realise the intended reception and precisely through this also achieve the highest possible measure of gratification. Ideal communication in this form will most probably never be reached. How deviations from the ideal are assessed depends on how much weight is given to communicative rules, intentions of authors, and interests of spectators in specific contexts of film

24 Communicative conventions are insufficient because they are variable, depending on historical and cultural contexts. When filmmakers violate communicative rules and produce character representations that are ambiguous and misleading, involuntarily comical, etc., then their intentions alone cannot be decisive. And the interests of the viewers certainly must follow communicative rules and intentions to some degree at least.

communication. In mainstream movies, for instance, the prime goal is to satisfy the spectators, even against filmmakers' intentions. Here the film is primarily a commodity and the client is king. For the auteur film, in contrast, the intentions of the filmmakers conventionally pull greater weight. It may be generally stated that normative statements and assertions about ideal character reception can only be justified by weighing up the three criteria, and that they thus depend on the particular contexts and practices of film communication.

A preliminary conclusion might then be: firstly, in meta-representational communication such as character analysis, empirical hypotheses are constructed about the probable, factual, or intended character reception of concrete (groups of) recipients—how might Rick be understood by future viewers; what conceptions of Rick would spectators of different times, cultures, and milieus develop; how did the filmmakers intend him to be understood? Secondly, in meta-representational communication normative assertions about ideal character reception are at least implicitly presupposed—what would an ideal understanding of Rick be, taking into account the intentions of the authors, the interests of the spectators, common dispositions, and communicative rules and contexts? Thirdly, statements about the characters themselves can be explained on this basis: they are based on implicit assumptions about the ideal character reception of competent viewers. Since the viewers' ideas of a character change over the course of a film, statements must furthermore generalize in order to ascribe certain largely stable characteristics to the character itself.

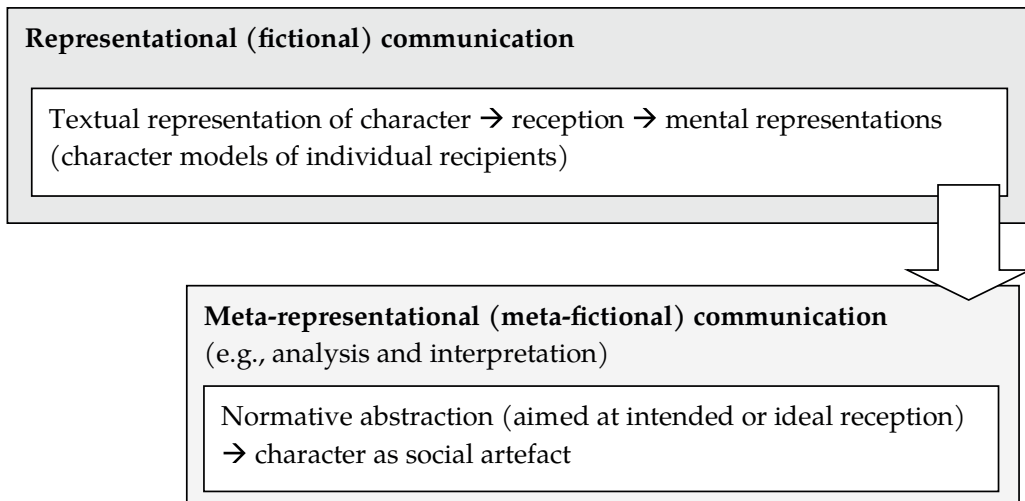


Diagram 1 From individual mental representations of a character to the intersubjective character as a social artefact

The creation of characters as communicative artefacts thus proves to be a multi-layered process (see Diagram 1). At the start of fictional (or more generally: representational)

communication, producers create representations of characters in order to evoke imaginations of those characters in the recipients. Intersubjective correspondences of these imaginations are made possible by an interaction of collective dispositions of perception and experience, communicative rules, contextual knowledge, and the consideration of authors' intentions and recipients' interests. The same factors also enable the reconstruction of ideal character conceptions in meta-fictional (or more generally: meta-representational) communication. Abstracting from these ideal character conceptions finally leads to the character itself as a communicative artefact, an intersubjective abstract object, and a component of the meaning of the text.

The way in which characters appear and are discussed in meta-representational communication has far-reaching consequences for their analysis. The first concerns the scope and objects of character analysis. When characters are analysed, not only are they themselves discussed, but also all other aspects of representational (fictional) communication that relate to them, including the textual means and forms of their representation and all varieties of their reception (individual, group, ideal, intended, or probable reception). In previous character theories, statements about these different objects of investigation have not been clearly distinguished. The characters themselves have often been confused with representations or imaginations of characters. Pointing out the differences between such objects makes it possible to explain enduring misunderstandings between competing theories of character and to integrate their results. Roughly speaking, structuralist theories have concentrated on character representation, cognitive theories on character reception, and hermeneutical theories on the characters themselves. The different theoretical strands might thus benefit from each other exactly because they have focused on different aspects of the object domain, as will be shown later.

A third consequence is that the features and structures of characters can at least partially be derived from the structure of their mental representations. Characters are not mere signs but are based on mental models of beings with physical, psychological, and social features, which are imagined based on the perception of the film. This means that character reception and mental character models are of central importance in the analysis. The next chapter will therefore deal in more detail with character reception and try to describe what makes it intersubjective. Film communication presupposes some universal dispositions of perception, comprehension, and affect, and since only communicative norms can guarantee the intersubjectivity of character reception, statements about characters will always be implicitly normative. Precisely because universal dispositions and collective norms are widely shared, this kind of normativity generally remains inconspicuous and rarely provokes controversy. However, when problems with characters arise and their proper analysis is required, then statements can ultimately only be substantiated by reconstructing ideal character conceptions and processes of abstraction, and by weighing up against each other collective dispositions, communicative rules, intentions of authors, and interests of spectators in specific contexts of communication.

Thus, a pragmatics of communication provides the most convincing basis for understanding characters. On this basis, characters can be defined as recognisable represented beings with the attributed capability of intentionality. They are constituted as cultural artefacts through representational communication and discussed in meta-representational communication. Characters are fictional when films are fictional and do not explicitly or implicitly claim that concrete beings with the same features exist in reality (even if they have been modelled on real persons).

One could also say that characters are elements of the meaning of a text, whereby 'meaning' must be understood as an intersubjective, ultimately normative construct. When we talk about characters, we always implicitly assume the successful joint construction of similar mental models in the communication between authors and audience. The success of such communication is determined based on a set of criteria that range from largely universal bodily dispositions (we could all see that the character has dark hair) to culturally specific conventions (for example, concerning the understanding of the characters' motivation). Due to processes of normative abstraction according to such criteria, characters are not simply generalisations of the diverse character conceptions of individual recipients—of what is the same in all these individual ideas—but of what should be the same in all of them. In short, characters are grounded in the normative abstraction of ideally intersubjective character models.²⁵ As communicative artefacts, they are multidimensional objects of meta-representational communication: When analysing characters, interpreting them, or simply talking about them, one can not only ascribe certain traits, actions and relationships to them as represented beings, but also describe how they are shaped as artefacts by textual strategies, or examine how mental models of them emerge in various types of reception.²⁶ The following chapters will describe how these different aspects of character analysis are interconnected and what the corresponding structures of characters are.

The ontology of characters outlined here could be extended to entire represented worlds (mostly discussed as 'fictional worlds' or 'storyworlds'): every such world is—just like a character—a communicative artefact that arises through the intersubjective formation of mental representations by means of (fictional) texts. Storyworlds are naturally much more complex structures than individual characters. They form a total framework, a system, which comprises not only characters and their interrelations but also all their spatio-temporal environment, inanimate objects, situations and events, norms, and principles. The structures of this system have been described in detail in the theories of fictional worlds, and character analysis might well profit

25 In many ways, this approach resembles Fotis Jannidis's conception of a character as a mental model of a model recipient (2004: 185), but it seeks to avoid its inherent personalisation and attempts to elucidate how a character is constructed as a social artefact on the basis of communicative norms and practices.

26 This distinction of different forms of reception resembles the distinction of different constructs of recipients in Staiger 1992 or Iser 1994: 50–67.

from them.²⁷ As represented beings with intentionality, characters are particularly important and prominent inhabitants of represented worlds. Similar relationships hold between characters and stories (see also Chapter 1). A story contains a chain of events from a represented world that usually consists primarily of actions of characters. Ontologically, this chain of events is, just like the world to which it belongs, a communicative artefact that is mentally represented in the form of event conceptions or situation models. Character theory is thus not only closely connected with more general theories of fiction and narration, worldbuilding and storytelling, but can make relevant contributions to them. The conception of character presented here makes it also easier to situate the character concept in a field of related concepts with which it is often confused and to distinguish characters more clearly from persons, actors, star images, actants, parts, or roles.²⁸

The question is now how characters and the aspects of communication connected with them can best be investigated in a systematic way. The essential purpose of communication and the precondition for the emergence of characters lies in reception, in the mental processes that emerge by interacting with (media) texts. The following chapter will therefore deal with how characters are (re-)constructed and experienced in reception processes.

3.3 Reception: How Are Characters Understood and Experienced?

How characters are perceived, understood, and experienced is crucial for their analysis. Firstly, the reception of characters is of interest in itself and plays a central role for the overall impact of a film (or other media text). Secondly, characters' traits can only be discovered through the reception process. The first question is therefore what processes produce the effects of characters. How is Rick Blaine perceived by the viewers, why is he admired or pitied? Whoever poses a question of this kind usually presupposes that the character is already unproblematically given for the audience and asks what further reactions it might trigger in its members.

However, the preceding chapter has uncovered a second and more fundamental meaning of character reception. The text, as a communicative tool, is functionally determined by its reception. Its structures are—beyond a purely physical description—objectively given only to such an extent as the properties of the participants in

27 E.g., Ryan 1991; Doležel 1998; Surkamp 2002.

28 Such differences are blurred, for instance, in Gardies 1993: 54–63 or Blüher 1999: 64. Characters must be distinguished from real *persons* (while there is also an obvious relation, see Smith 1995: 20–22; Pfister 1988: 221f.). *Actors* and *stars* represent characters without turning into them. Their *star image* is a construct just like a fictional character but remains related to a real being outside a film (Dyer 1999). A further line must be drawn between a character and a *part*, understood as the basis, laid down in a script, for the representation of a character. *Role* refers to structural functions of characters; a well-known example is 'actantial roles' (Greimas 1972; Casetti and di Chio 1994: 176ff.). *Actants* as bearers of such abstract positions must also not be confused with characters; one and the same character can perform several actantial roles.

communication allow. Therefore, even the simplest attributes of characters can ultimately be revealed systematically only by recourse to ideal reception processes: how else could the proposition be justified that Rick did indeed act heroically and did not want to revenge himself on Ilsa? Or that he slept with Ilsa although this was not shown? Characters are created through imagination in representational communication. Watching a film triggers imaginations of a world and its inhabitants in the viewers. Statements about characters ultimately refer to such imaginations and to normative assumptions about their intersubjective validity. Propositions about Rick can only be verified if I know how ideas of Rick are formed during the viewing of *Casablanca* and under what circumstances they can be accepted as correct. Mental representations thus make up a basis of the analysis of characters. At least in problematical cases, the analysis should be capable of making the implicit assumptions about them explicit.

These mental representations (or ideas, imaginations, mental models) of characters are, at the same time, embedded in larger frameworks of reception. I shall subsume any perceptual, cognitive, and affective processes that contribute to the formation of mental character models or contain them under the concept of character reception. This is broader than the notions of other theories, such as 'parasocial interaction' (Hartmann, Klimmt, and Schramm 2004) or 'character engagement' (Smith 1995). Character reception begins even before the first reaction of viewers to represented beings like Rick sets in; it begins as soon as they start to reconstruct such beings from their first perceptions of character representations in the text. To summarise: a character is derived from mental character models, and these are part of the process of character reception, which in turn is embedded in the context of film perception and reception as a whole. The result is the following chain of indications:

Reception of the entire film → character reception (as part of film reception) → viewers'
subjective character conceptions → intersubjectively given character

All systematic character analysis, therefore, presupposes a model of reception.²⁹ Anyone who wants to investigate characters must know how they are perceived, recognised, understood, and experienced. Only by recourse to a model of reception can it be uncovered whether characters are incomprehensible or likeable or why audiences empathise with them. But even when reception processes are not as directly involved as in connection with statements about characters' physical, mental, or social qualities, propositions cannot simply be justified by reference to the film. It is precisely when films and characters are understood in different ways by different recipients that analysis is necessary.

29 Some scholars explicitly or implicitly propound the rival thesis that the proper foundation of character analysis is not a reception theory but a text and meaning theory, i.e., a semantics of fictional texts (e.g., Doležel 1998). This seems insufficient for a differentiated analysis for two reasons: for one, any kind of semantics is ultimately only an abstraction from intersubjective communication centring on reception; and furthermore, semantic theories have the tendency to occupy themselves primarily with higher cognitive reception processes from an implicitly normative perspective, and to neglect more basic, affective, and non-norm-conforming aspects of reception.

The reception of characters encompasses diverse kinds of mental experiences, which can provisionally be arranged in the following way:

- Perceptual and sensory processes: perceiving or sensorially experiencing ‘the character itself’ or representations of the character; perceiving something connected with the character (objects, musical leitmotifs); perceiving the same things or situations as the character does.
- Higher cognitive (imaginative and epistemic) processes: developing an idea of a character, attributing traits to it; apprehending the external experiences and the inner life of a character; understanding its behaviour and its motives; sharing its opinions or thoughts; contemplating it; associating something with it; recognising its symbolism or its thematic content; considering it as the counterpart of an interaction; discovering similarities between a character and real persons; comparing oneself with it; analysing its structure and its mode of presentation.
- Affective processes: affectively responding to representations of the character, or to its appearances and movements; developing feelings toward a character; sharing its hopes and fears; experiencing similar emotions, feeling with a character, empathising with it. This sphere of the affective—explored in detail in Chapter 13 and Chapter 14—includes sensational and bodily processes (e.g., sensations induced by the representation or imagination of a character; imitation of movements; sharing the experiences of a character, such as dizziness in *Vertigo*) as well as conative processes (desiring the character; wishing certain things to happen to it; projecting goals on it; wishing to possess the character’s abilities; sharing its goals etc.).

The perceptions, cognitions, and affects in reception can only analytically be distinguished, but are actually closely interwoven.³⁰ Apart from such transitory experiences, spectators may develop certain persistent dispositions and attitudes relating to characters, such as stable images of their personalities; expectations of actions; sympathies, antipathies, or indifference.

This provisional draft of the field of character reception will be systematised later; it already makes clear, however, that much-debated concepts like ‘identification’ or ‘parasocial interaction’ alone are insufficient for a systematic examination of character reception. Moreover, the provisional list already indicates why approaches to film reception that are based in direct perception theory or enactivism must fail—they cannot account for many more complex, higher-level mental processes.

³⁰ The interconnections between mental processes can be described not only in terms of psychology but also by recourse to the philosophy of mind, particularly phenomenology; see, for instance, Husserl’s *Logische Untersuchungen* (1993).

A theory of character reception should describe its general structures, processes, and products comprehensively and systematically and answer at least four basic questions: What dimensions or levels does character reception have? What are its presuppositions in relation to the film, the viewers, and their contexts? How do character conceptions originate, and what role do they play in other conscious processes? How are they built up and structured (as mental representations)? A number of specific problems have been particularly controversial for reception theories (Staiger 2005: 7): How are cognitive and affective, conscious and unconscious, innate and learned aspects of reception related to each other? Are mental representations of characters related more to language or images, or neither? What is the decisive factor: text, spectator, or context? How active are the spectators? What are the basic and crucial structures of their minds? How does character reception relate to the perception of real persons? What are identification and empathy? What differences are there between characters in film and other media like literature?

Various theories approach these questions in very different ways (see Chapter 2): hermeneutics and reception aesthetics emphasise the historical differences between the horizons of expectation of producers and recipients and the necessity of the interpretation of characters. Phenomenology starts from the individual recipient's perspective and offers detailed descriptions of subjective experiences (but has difficulties in grasping processes that lie below the threshold of conscious experience). Semiotics regards reception as a process of semiosis, as largely culturally moulded sign processing and text decoding governed by conventional codes. Psychoanalysis sees the relationship with characters and producers as determined by the dynamics of drives in subjects, the conflict-laden relations between the id, the ego, and the superego, by conditioning in early childhood and experiences of lack as well as processes of desire, repression, or identification. Post-structuralism combines primarily semiotic and psychoanalytical models, whereas the cultural studies approach stresses the role of medial and sociocultural contexts.

These approaches dominated theory formation until developments in the cognitive sciences in the mid-eighties provided new impulses and increasingly became the basis for several sophisticated models of the reception of characters.³¹ The most important contribution of cognitive theories of reception to solving problems of character analysis is that they model the fundamental processes of the creation and reception of characters in the first place, whereas most other approaches take characters as something simply given. In my view, cognitive theories offer further advantages (Eder 2003a), in particular greater conceptual clarity and differentiation, compatibility with

31 See, for film and media studies, Bordwell 1985a, 1989, 1992; Branigan 1992; Ohler 1994; Currie 1995, 1999; Buckland 1995; Smith 1995; Anderson 1996; Tan 1996; Grodal 1999, 2001; Persson 2003; the contributions in Bryant and Zillman 1991; Plantinga and Smith 1999; Ohler and Nieding 2002; Anderson and Anderson 2005; and the special issue of *Film Studies* 8 (2006). For literary studies, see Grabes 1978; Margolin 1990a, 1990b; Gerrig and Allbritton 1990; Gerrig 1993; Riehl 1998; Schneider 2000; Culpeper 1996, 2000; Christmann and Schreier 2001; Hogan 2003a; Jannidis 2004 et al.

empirical research, integration of scientific findings, and an explanatory approach that is more comprehensive and better capable of explaining the relationship between media reception and everyday perception. Of course, other approaches have crucial advantages, too, which should not be lost. By keeping the cognitive foundation as open and inclusive as possible, many of their findings may be integrated.³² As the cognitive approach is of relevance to many aspects of my argumentation, I shall now present it in greater detail.

Cognitive Theories of Reception

Since current cognitive approaches are still frequently misrepresented, it is necessary to first clear up some possible misunderstandings:³³ first, recent cognitive theories by no means consider only conscious, higher-level cognitive processes. They model reception as a psychophysical, partially preconscious process consisting of interlaced cognitive, affective, perceptual, and sensory responses to external or internal cues. Even attention towards certain textual elements may already depend on affective factors. Second, cognitive theories see cognition not as a detached computer algorithm, but as shaped by dynamic interactions between brain, body, and both physical and social environments—as embodied, embedded, and often also extended and enactive (4E cognition).³⁴ Consequently, the experience of films, stories, and characters is an active, bodily operation of completing, imagining, conjecturing, coherence-making, and sense-searching, embedded in specific communicative situations and co-determined by media structures and viewers' motives. The processes and results of this operation may diverge significantly from the everyday perception of real environments. Third, cognitive theories turn increasingly to sociocultural and interactional factors of cognition, including stereotypes, ideologies, power relations in society, or affordances of certain media (e.g., van Dijk 2015; Brylla and Kramer 2018). Fourthly and crucially, cognitive theories are not homogeneous but form a diverse field. For example, when describing processes of reception as 'information processing', the textual 'information'

32 Thus the 'horizons of expectation' of hermeneutics and the 'codes' of semiotics may be described more exactly as systems of mental dispositions, and 'signs' as conventionalised textual stimuli. The term 'sign' suggests different assumptions: a sign is generally used consciously by a communicative instance, it is arbitrary, rests on cultural conventions, and possesses a stable meaning that is established in a relatively specific way by a communication community. I leave the question of whether all these things equally apply to film open. Whenever I speak of 'filmic signs', I also include textual elements that influence reception but cannot be assigned a clear communicative purpose or may even counteract some such purpose, and whose effects are grounded in modes of perception and cognition that may be independent of a particular culture and change from context to context. So whenever I speak of films as 'texts', this is also to be understood in such a wide sense. On the possibility of synthesising different fundamental theories of film and human experience, see also Bacon 2005.

33 Examples for misrepresentations or misunderstandings of that kind are Kappelhoff 2018 and Hochschild 2023.

34 See Newen, De Bruin, and Gallagher 2018; for a summary and application: Schiavi and van der Schyff 2018.

in question can be modelled in different ways as energy patterns, perceptual stimuli, textual cues, signs, external or internal representations, and the 'processing' can be modelled by reference to psychology, neuroscience, philosophy of mind, or combinations of these and further disciplines.

Despite their diversity, however, cognitive theories have certain basic principles in common (cf. Hogan 2003a: 29–31). They require that mental processes be described and explained as accurately and comprehensively as possible, in a logically coherent and empirically testable manner. Moreover, they start from a lower level than other theories such as hermeneutics or psychoanalysis. They try to offer explanatory models also for basic processes of reception, which are already necessary for the emergence of the idea of a character, which can only then become an object of interpretation or emotion.³⁵ Most cognitive theories also assume that a mental architecture with certain resources, possibilities and limits shapes both everyday experience and media reception. In order to explain why humans possess this mental architecture, evolutionary psychology is used by some; however, this is by no means necessary and I will not use it.

Three different basic models of cognitive theories can be distinguished, representing stages of increasing objectification: representationalism, connectivism, and neurobiology (see Hogan 2003a: 30–34; Thagard 2005). In everyday life, one describes one's own experiences and those of others—here: character reception—intuitively, from a subjective perspective, and in folk psychological terms. On a first level of cognitive theory formation, representationalism, such descriptions are objectified, clarified conceptually and empirically, systematised, and further differentiated. Here the assumption of mental representations plays a central role. By contrast, neurobiology seeks to reconstruct the concrete material correlates of mental processes, in particular the neuronal structures and activation patterns of the brain. Such materialist descriptions of mental processes have the advantage of greater objectivity, but entail the loss of the subjective perspective, detach themselves from ordinary language, require extensive experimentation, and rapidly turn exceedingly complex. Connectivism simplifies and abstracts principles of neuroscience by regarding consciousness, in analogy to the nervous system and the electronic computer, as a network of representational nodes through whose spreading activation (increasing neuronal action potential) information is processed in an associative and parallelly distributed way.

These three basic models do not exclude each other but can be understood as different levels of description of one and the same phenomenal complex. The representationalist approach, however, seems the best-suited for character analysis by far, because it

35 Hermeneutics or psychoanalysis lack such a fundamental model. Structuralist semiotics, by contrast, uses a relatively rigid conception based on language and therefore unsuitable for film. Cognitive theories, however, unlike semiotic ones, explain the understanding of audiovisual narrations not primarily by reference to codes and in analogy to linguistic understanding but by recourse to psychological concepts (e.g., mental schemata) and in analogy to everyday perception (cf. Bordwell 1985a: 16–26; Grodal 1999: 13f., 74–77).

facilitates connections with practical analysis, folk psychology, and theories beyond cognitivism. Some cognitive and other theories (e.g., in film phenomenology) reject the representationalist approach and pursue the idea of a direct perception of both natural and audiovisual environments, for instance, following James Gibson's work.³⁶ In my view, this approach is unsuitable as a foundation of character theory: if my ontological considerations are correct, then it can neither consistently define what characters are nor explain their different kinds of properties and the ways we talk about them.

The basic notions of representationalism may be summarised as follows:³⁷ whenever items of textual information are perceived and processed, they are run step by step through relevant parts of a bodily and mental system. The images and sounds of a film are perceived by sensory organs and further processed in auditory and visual centres (associated with other centres of sensory perception). The resulting filtered information can directly affect the emotional centres and trigger basal affects. After further, partially parallel, steps of processing and experiencing, the items of information reach the working memory where they are synthesised and given the form of certain mental representations and higher cognitions that are, in turn, accompanied by conscious experiences and more complex emotions. All these steps of processing may simultaneously stimulate various bodily reactions.

The capacities and rhythms of the sensory, working, and long-term memories influence the outcome. The eyes, while scanning the field of vision in saccades at lightning speed, already focus on certain areas. Not all information can be taken in, experienced consciously, and stored; the limited capacity leads to selective attention, including additional control by affects and interests. The consequences have been impressively demonstrated by the famous film experiments on 'inattention blindness' (Simons and Chabris 1999): many of the spectators focusing their attention on the change of the ball in a basketball game do not even notice a person in a gorilla costume intermingling with the players. What is perceived when watching a movie, therefore, not only depends on the availability of certain textual signs, but also on the spectators. Character conceptions and other mental representations arise when the mental and bodily dispositions of viewers interact with textual information. The objective information given in the film (its changing patterns of light and sound) is not received one-to-one, but processed selectively, modified in steps, and supplemented by memory contents. Such processes are fundamentally bidirectional, guided in varying degrees by the textual input (processing bottom-up) or pre-existing mental dispositions (processing top-down).

36 Among cognitive theories, e.g., Anderson 1996.

37 The essential groundwork is provided by Hogan 2003a; Persson 2003; Grodal 2006; Lakoff and Johnson 2001. Their work is not mutually compatible in every single respect. I have therefore tried, in my summary presentation, to combine the consensual aspects with the most convincing controversial ones in a consistent manner.

In the empirical study of literature, the totality of the authors' and readers' dispositions has been called the 'system of preconditions' (*Voraussetzungssystem*) of the communication partners (Schmidt 1991: 71–74). It comprises the abilities, knowledge, general motivations, needs, and intentions of producers and recipients, as well as the influences of their sociocultural circumstances. Furthermore, it includes 'special conditions', i.e., assumptions about the other communication partners and their dispositions, the knowledge of communicative actions, roles, and expectations, situative physical and mental states (Schmidt 1991: 72). The spectrum of mental dispositions ranges from innate reaction tendencies, such as those concerning startle effects or optical illusions, to culturally specific beliefs and individual concepts of identity. Partial aspects have been dealt with under a variety of different concepts, the most common being categories, mental schemas, framing, knowledge, and memory.³⁸ A schema might involve, for instance, the preconscious expectations on a handshake; one assumes that it will last for two or three seconds and is surprised when it lasts much longer (Smith 1995: 51). All such dispositions focus attention, structure information processing, and direct expectations and processes of making meaning. They permit inferences going beyond the textual basis, which are usually of an informal and subconscious kind. A well-known example is the mental script for a restaurant visit. Entering a restaurant, one expects a particular sequence of events: sitting down, ordering, eating, paying, and leaving. This sequence is presupposed, so it does not have to be shown in detail in a film. Deviations from the script (such as eating without sitting down or paying), however, trigger surprise. Such dispositions influence the perception of characters on all levels: even the cut from one image to the next is conditioned by 'sensory-motor projections', implicit expectations on continuity of movement (in editing) whose disappointment, e.g., by jump cuts, will lead to perceptual micro-irritations (Hogan 2007).

Compared with hermeneutics, semiotics, and psychoanalysis, cognitive theories permit a more differentiated and empirically substantiated description of the system of mental dispositions as a hierarchically structured multiplicity.³⁹ In nearly every case, mental dispositions involve affects or could trigger or be activated by them. Some of these cognitive and affective preconditions seem to be universal, e.g., the basic capabilities to recognise certain affective patterns or to empathise. Others, such as knowledge of languages, stereotypes or complex moral emotions, are learnt in sociocultural contexts—also of watching films—and are connected to particular

38 On the concept of mental disposition, see Persson 2003: 8–13.

39 Hermeneutics and semiotics attempt to apprehend the system of mental dispositions by means of their concepts of the 'horizon of expectations', or the 'codes' of producers and recipients, but their results remain relatively unspecific due to a lack of a proper psychological foundation. Psychoanalysis (in its earlier versions), by contrast, describes a relatively complex framework of dispositions that is, however, in many ways incomplete or speculative and also often conflicts with more recent empirical research results. (An integration of such research results into more recent psychoanalytic approaches has, for instance, been attempted by Krause 1998.)

times or cultures. A third group of dispositions stems from individual experiences, for example personal recollections that are evoked by sensory stimuli like particular smells or patterns of movements. A fourth group depends on the situation, for example the specific motives for going to the cinema or the expectations generated by the specific film itself. Within certain limits, however, intersubjective, generalisable statements about the connections between film, cognition, and emotion are possible.

I mention these distinctions here because, contrary to widespread views, they make clear that the reception of media and consequently of characters is not at all restricted to either everyday perception or the decoding of conventional signs, that it is neither the mere reproduction of textual information nor a process of understanding devoid of all emotion. It is, furthermore, neither biologically or culturally determined nor purely subjective. It is rather an experiential process with cognitive, affective, and somatic aspects, which is specified by dispositions on at least four levels: the biological, sociocultural, individual, and the situation- and text-specific levels. In order to talk about commonalities in reception, it is necessary first to clarify what correspondences may underlie these processes at each of these levels. Before dealing with those most relevant to analysing characters, it may suffice to say that there is a very general foundation for the basic understanding and experience of characters that transcends epochs and cultures, but upon which rest innumerable cultural and individual particularities.

A largely universal basic structure is already given with the mental architecture: most humans possess certain kinds of sensory organs, systems of short- and long-term memory, emotional and motor centres in the brain. The breadth of variation of this mental architecture and its capacities is relatively limited among neurotypical and able-bodied adults, but children, neurodivergent, blind, or deaf people, as well as intoxicated individuals, may perceive films in quite different ways. It is the long-term memory, however, that is mostly responsible for fundamental differences among spectators. Its material basis is in the plasticity of neuronal complexes throughout the entire brain. In a functionalist perspective, it comprises two main components: the procedural memory in which automatic skills and motor processes are stored (e.g., riding a bicycle, slicing onions, reacting bodily to certain perceptual stimuli), and the declarative memory that contains knowledge about the world and personal experiences (semantic and episodic memory).

The contents of memory are often modelled by the cognitive sciences (but also in semiotics) in the form of associative conceptual systems or lists of features. Stored items of information are combined to form more complex structures: schemata, prototypes, and exempla (Hogan 2003a: 44–48). Schemata are general structures of knowledge based on the constellations of features of human beings, things, or sequences of experiences (like the script of a restaurant visit mentioned above). They form an open pattern of alternative features arranged according to probabilities of occurrence. When Western people enter a restaurant, they will expect with decreasing probability that

they will look for a place themselves, that they will be led to a table by a waiter, that they shall have to wait at the bar, or that they are forced to help out in the kitchen. The fact that spectators also use schemata for particular groups of human beings or categories of fictional characters (waiters, cowboys, femmes fatales) will be dealt with later in greater detail (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6).

Prototypes are, as it were, the more specific default case of a schema: subjectively imagined constellations of typical features of particular kinds of human beings, things, or situations (Hogan 2003a: 45–46). Apart from the standard values of the schema, prototypes contain additional features that are considered to be average or particularly characteristic and that separate the category from others. Since a man is defined, amongst other things, by not being a woman (and vice versa), the prototypical conceptions of men and women emphasise their differences, and thus are oriented toward the concept of a ‘particularly masculine’ man and ‘particularly feminine’ woman, rather than towards, for instance, average cases. Prototypes are thus not far from stereotypes, although they may be linked to personal experiences. A third form of memory content are exempla, representations of exemplary individuals. Thus, if I see a Nazi in a movie, I might, for example, be reminded of Major Strasser from *Casablanca*.

The schemata, prototypes, and exempla stored in the memory form an important foundation for the understanding and experience of characters. As the examples already suggest, such memory content is not affectively neutral, but connected with affective reactions (emotional memory). The link with affects and emotions is perhaps strongest with regard to episodic recollections: when I recall my own personal love encounters or traumatic experiences of violent events, then the associated emotions will be re-awakened (Hogan 2003a: 155–65). Therefore, medial representations are, in this way, closely connected with personal experiences and feelings. Memories can be activated by the perception of particular features, which in turn may lead to the association of further features, affects, and expectations with what is perceived—often stereotypical ones: in a film noir, the appearance of a lascivious woman with black hair might make viewers expect difficulties for the male protagonist. Memory supplements the information perceived, making reception possible, but it can also often trivialise and automate the process to some extent. Schemata and prototypes may be changed and reflected, but this usually happens only when information contradicts them or makes them conspicuous. Nevertheless, most information processing takes place associatively and metaphorically, not mechanically or by logical reasoning and concentrated rational reflection. Many of the things stored in memory function like metaphors because they are not only activated by their original area of experience but are transferred to other areas as well.⁴⁰ This affects the perception of human beings and characters in many different ways: their bodies may be considered to be containers of their souls (*21 Grams*); sad music may be connected with their emotional

40 On the theory of conceptual metaphors see Hogan 2003a: 87–154; Lakoff and Johnson 1999: Chapters 4 and 5. On corresponding metaphors in film, see Coëgnarts and Kravanja 2012; Fahlenbrach 2016.

state; a skeleton may stand for death. The term 'memory storage' in itself expresses a metaphorical understanding of memory as a container.

Spectators acquire the schemata, prototypes, and exempla stored in their memory in the course of their socialisation through individual experiences within specific cultural contexts. Their memories and the associated emotions are therefore always to some extent individual and different; however, commonalities also exist. Shared forms of memory may be related to various factors. One area is that of biological, genetically determined bases and mostly universal tendencies, for example in regard to particular capabilities (e.g., empathy and linguistic competence), developmental stages (from childhood to old age), experiences (based on gender, age, size, etc.), interests and affective dispositions (sexuality, altruism, fascination with death and disease). A second group consists in sociocultural factors like cultural spaces (language, nationality); living conditions and group affiliations (milieus, classes, peer groups); social norms and rituals (for emotions, sex/gender behaviours, etc.); trades, professions, and other activities; and institutionalised instances of socialisation (family, school), including mass media. In view of this large spectrum of factors, differences and commonalities between human beings cannot solely be traced back to conflicts between drives and conditioning in early childhood, as older varieties of psychoanalysis seem to suggest. Memory is always formed in the interaction of multiple biological and social factors whose relative influence is still waiting to be explored systematically.

This brief summary of cognitive theories has not yet included their treatment of the reception of media. It presented a general picture of how human beings encounter the world: on the basis of a mental architecture possessing particular capacities and dispositions that are moulded biologically, socially, and individually and that show differences particularly (but not exclusively) in the area of memory. Cognitive and affective information processing (or more simply: text-induced thoughts and affects) starts from this basis and runs through several phases, particularly the formation of mental representations. Many cognitive theories assume that the reception of media is essentially based on the same foundations and mental dispositions as the ordinary perception of non-medial environments (Currie 1999a). They propose that the spectators are active individuals who are looking for meaning by means of ordinary cognitive procedures (Bordwell 1985a: 30–33). 'Instead of searching for a "language" of film we had better search for ways and means to make films in such a way as to release those activities of "cognising" that lead to understanding' (Bordwell 1992: 7); and one might add: that also lead to affective experience. In this search, however, it is of importance to pay closer attention to certain crucial differences between media reception and ordinary everyday perception: most importantly, communicative framing, media-specific input, and the activation of specific dispositions.

Recipients are usually aware of being in a communicative situation and perceiving a media text. Such reception is obviously preconditioned by the given media framework or dispositif (cinema, television, video/DVD; e.g., communal viewing; ticket;

darkened room in the cinema) and its paratexts (trailers, posters, advertisements).⁴¹ This communicative framing and the film itself can activate specific dispositions: the knowledge of media-specific rules and conventions of communication; the feeling of not perceiving present objects and real situations and thus of not being able to interfere; the subliminal awareness of fictionality, of perceiving an invented story; the readiness to accept, therefore, even a non-realistic logic in the narrated world. At the same time, specific contents stored in memory are called up: media-specific knowledge about themes, genres, and conventions of narration, for instance types of characters and standard situations; knowledge about inter-textual and inter-medial references; knowledge about authors, directors, stars, and their images or intentions; and, finally, the assumption of the broader significance of what is shown, i.e., that the show is not just a randomly observed event but a consciously shaped component of a communicative process (see Culpeper 1996: 353). When, and to what extent, such dispositions are activated will depend on the kind of media text and its recipients (as indicated by debates about self-referentiality; Withalm 1999).

A further difference between everyday perception and media reception lies in the kind of input. In the case of media reception, this input basically comes from two different sources: the media text and the context of reception (who hasn't been annoyed by noisy neighbours in the cinema?). The recipients are able to shift their attention from one of these sources to another; they may, for instance, divert it from the screen to a neighbour. Furthermore, in contrast to the everyday world, media perception does not engage all the senses directly; for instance, film only indirectly involves the senses of smell, taste, temperature, or touch (see Antunes 2016). The most important difference, however, lies in the potential of media to guide the perception process in various ways. By way of that, they are able to generate more comprehensive knowledge about characters than is usually available about persons in the outside world.

Specific features and conventions distinguish film reception from other media like literature. Compared to reading, watching the audiovisual stream is more temporally bound (even in the case of video streaming), which influences the forms and rhythms of attention and experience. Films employ a polyphony of signs—moving images, stills, noises, music, writing, and spoken language—and some of them can be understood without relying on specific cultural codes.⁴² As analogue, iconic signs, moving images,

41 The Foucauldian term 'dispositif' is hard to translate into English. Broadly, it refers to 'a framework in which techniques and humans are arranged to make it possible to perform repetitive and distributed activities' (Larroche 2019: xv). In German media theory, the term 'Mediendispositiv' ('media dispositif') is widely used to talk about a medium such as television as an arrangement of technologies, organisations, professional roles, aesthetic conventions, and other elements that together enable certain forms of communication and establish certain power relations (e.g., Hickethier 2003).

42 See Grodal 1999: 7, 77. Psychological investigations support the assumption that 'film reception rests on principles at work in the perception of reality' and that small children or members of 'filmless' cultures can understand films without having to learn anything special about them (Schwan and Hesse 1996). Nevertheless, of course, the use of specific forms of representation makes more complex films into something whose understanding must be learned. But in many cases, 'even stylistic or

and sounds can be in many respects qualitatively identical with what they represent, for instance in their forms, colours, or rhythms. Moreover, certain stylistic strategies, like continuity editing, partially correspond to evolutionarily established patterns.⁴³ Films may thereby induce responses that are partly similar to real world perception. They tend to be mimetic in a stronger sense than literature and less conspicuously.⁴⁴ Cognitive theories also point to relevant differentiations: between elements of film reception that are quasi-natural and others that are strongly shaped by culture; between automatic, preconscious, and conscious reception processes, and between different kinds of cultural influences and cinematic conventions. For example, whereas mainstream films direct the viewers' attention predominantly to the represented events, some experimental films quite purposefully direct it to their conspicuous means of representation (Smith 1995: 41ff.).

Several basic assumptions of cognitive theories may thus be provisionally formulated. Film reception is an active sensory, cognitive, and affective process, which takes place in the framework of a certain mental architecture and includes the formation of mental representations, including conceptions of characters. Film information interacts with the dispositions of viewers, such as memory contents in the form of schemata, prototypes, and exempla. Viewers' dispositions are situated on several levels—biological, sociocultural, individual, and situational—and therefore exhibit both differences and commonalities that permit intersubjective reception without excluding individual and cultural differences. Based on these preconditions, film reception resembles the perception of the everyday world in some important ways, but also diverges from it significantly because of its communicative (and often fictional) framing and its media-specific inputs, conventions, and memory contents. This general summary of cognitive reception theories will now serve as the basis for the following more detailed analysis of the reception of characters.

Levels of Character Reception

How can character reception be modelled, and what does the model imply for character analysis? In the context of cognitive theories, there are various proposals to answer these questions, but as far as I know, there is no model to date that would bring together all the aforementioned forms of character-related perception, cognition,

genre-specific conventions' are 'still learnt and applied by means of ordinary patterns of thinking' (Bordwell 1992: 7).

43 On the concept of 'signs close to direct perception', see Sachs-Hombach 2003; on the correspondences between audiovisual media and direct environmental stimuli, cf. Schwender 2001 and Schwab and Schwender 2007.

44 Hans J. Wulff assumes, in contrast to Grodal, 'that the basic communicative relationship remains conscious in all phases of the communication process and that it appears differentiated in numerous markings on the surface of the text' (Wulff 1999a: 58f.). '*A film image not only shows something, but also shows that it shows*' (Wulff 1999a: 58; emphasis in the original). It does not necessarily mean, however, that such 'showing' is consciously foregrounded.

and affect in a systematic framework; most approaches restrict themselves to cognitive processes and focus on the level of the represented world.⁴⁵ Per Persson's general model of film reception, however, offers a promising point of departure, because it integrates a wide variety of research results and corresponds to numerous other models from film studies and other disciplines. In cognitive film studies, for example, Persson's model can be related to Bordwell's levels of meaning (1989) or Grodal's flow schema of reception (1999). Table 1 indicates that Persson's model is altogether more comprehensive and more differentiated (Grodal, however, establishes connections with affective processes).⁴⁶

Persson 2003	Bordwell 1989	Grodal 1999
nonrepresentation	---	basic perception → intensities
perception 1	referential meaning	memory matching, association → saturations
perception 2		
situation models		mental models → tensities, emotivities
thematic inferences	explicit & implicit meaning	---
interpretation	symptomatic meaning	---

Table 1 Levels of film reception and meaning according to different theories

Persson distinguishes six levels of reception processes built upon each other that differ especially with regard to viewers' mental representations (2003: 32–33). The first level consists in the basic perception of objectless forms, colours, contours, movements, sounds, and rhythms ('nonrepresentation'). On the second level, objects and experiences are apprehended by the perceptual centres in a rudimentary way ('perception 1'); on the third level, they are roughly categorised and identified with

45 For example, David Bordwell (1992) describes character reception primarily as an application of mental schemata and concentrates on the formation of character conceptions. Murray Smith (1995) supplements this perspective by processes of cognitive and affective engagement; Hans J. Wulff (1997) explores the limits and sources of character synthesis. Ralf Schneider (2000) describes in detail the formation of mental models in literary characters. Torben Grodal (1999, 2001) treats mental model formation as an aspect of his flow schema of affective film reception and assumes a simulation of characters' experiences. Researchers from media psychology and communication science describe character reception with the term of 'parasocial interaction' (e.g., Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm 2006). Numerous other authors deal in detail with particular aspects like identification, empathy, social perception, etc. (see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14 of this book). The most comprehensive works with regard to the breadth of reception processes considered seems to be Persson 2003 and Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm 2006. Persson, however, excludes affect and emotion, and the model of Klimmt and his colleagues fails to clarify the systematic ties between the various processes.

46 Table 1 compares Persson's approach only with two other influential models of cognitive film theory. Of course, there are various further models that distinguish different levels of film experience (e.g., Bacon 2005), including in later publications by Bordwell and Grodal. In addition, there are various theories in other disciplines such as literary studies (some are mentioned in Table 4).

the help of memory ('perception 2'). The fourth level ('situation models') comprises the formation of more complex mental models of characters, situations, and events—the construction of the represented world. On level five, theme-related inferences and processes of the interpretation of symbols and metaphors take place, which go beyond the storyworld ('thematic inferences'). The sixth level encompasses hypotheses about the pragmatic and communicative context of the film as well as its aesthetic analysis ('interpretation'). As Persson emphasises, this sequence of steps only shows the general tendency; the levels interact with each other in various ways.

Persson's reception model can be modified for our purposes in two respects. First, it may be simplified. The levels 2 to 4, which Persson does not separate precisely, can be combined, because each one focuses on gradually emerging mental representations of a storyworld (including its inhabitants) and thus differs crucially both from objectless perception and from the higher thematic and interpretative levels.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Persson's model can be supplemented: it only deals with cognitive processes, which should be connected with affective ones. All cognitions are also linked to affective tendencies, and all affects are induced or influenced by sensory and cognitive processes like perception or imagination (for more on that, see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14).⁴⁸ Thus, all the processes described in Persson's reception model can trigger affects—from automatic arousal through affective appraisals of characters to complex emotional episodes involving reflections on the film's cultural contexts. Such modifications permit the consideration of the whole breadth of cognitive and affective processes at various reception levels.

This modified version of Persson's approach forms the basis for a model of the film experience, which I have presented in more detail in other publications (Diagram 2).⁴⁹ Persson's approach can be triangulated not only with many other theories of film reception and art perception (e.g., Ohler and Nieding 2002; Pelowski et al. 2017) but also with various classical models used to describe and analyse the structures of artworks, from Ingarden's *The Literary Work of Art* and Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology* (1972: 3–17) to Bordwell's and Thompson's *Film Art* (2001 and later editions). A comparison of such analytical models shows that they generally meet at four structural levels of works of art: (1) the formal structures of textual signs, for instance the images and sounds of a film (style); (2) the world or story represented from a certain perspective (storyworld, diegesis, narration); (3) higher-order or figurative meanings (themes, metaphors, symbols, implicit meaning, etc.); and (4) indicators of communicative pragmatics (under

⁴⁷ See also the comparison with Bordwell and Grodal in Table 1.

⁴⁸ On the connections between cognition and emotion/affect, cf. Eder 2003a, 2007; Eder and Keil 2005a. Theoretical approaches to emotion in film studies include Murray Smith 1995; Tan 1996; Grodal 1999; Greg Smith 2003; Hogan 2003a; Zillmann 2005 as well as the contributions to Plantinga and Smith 1999; Brütsch et al. 2005; *Film Studies* 2006; Bartsch, Eder, and Fahlenbrach 2007. For a more recent overview on the relations between media and emotions, see Eder, Hanich, and Stadler 2019.

⁴⁹ E.g., in my discussions of *A Clockwork Orange* (Eder 2007a), the WikiLeaks video *Collateral Murder* (Eder 2018), and other films.

keywords like ‘implicit author’, ‘fiction signals’, ‘self-reference’, ‘symptomatic meaning’ etc.).⁵⁰ These structural levels of films and other artworks (shaded parts on the left of the diagram) can be seen as elicitors or objects of particular reception processes, which are also situated on four levels (light parts of diagram): of basal perception (seeing moving images, hearing sounds), the formation of mental models (of worlds, characters, and situations), inferences reaching beyond the represented world, as well as the reflection of communication itself and its elements and contexts in extratextual reality.

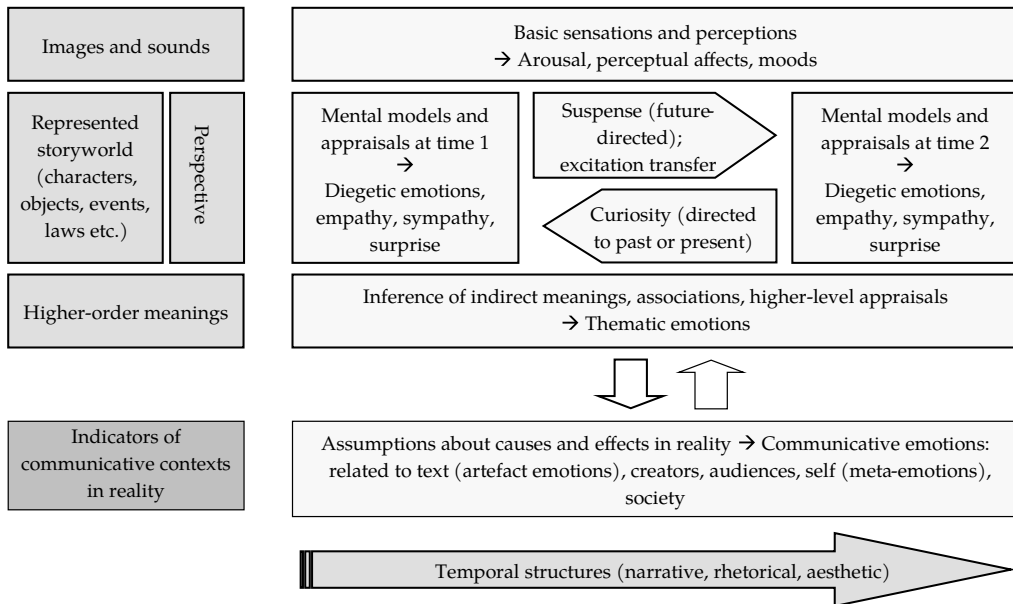


Diagram 2 Levels of film structures and corresponding reception processes

On the first level (here referred to as ‘basal perception’, which is meant to exclude the recognition of objects), the film is perceived sensually as a sequence of colours, forms, structures, movements, and sounds, and it thus generates perceptual affects, subliminal sensations, and moods.⁵¹ On the basis of these perceptual impressions, but only on a second level of further processes, the spectators recognise objects and construct the represented world with its inhabitants and events step by step (see Chapter 5). This construction always takes place from a particular perspective and consists predominantly in the formation of mental models: the spectators develop more or less detailed ideas of situations, beings, environments, and other elements of

50 The structural distinction of different levels often happens implicitly; the widely known model of film analysis by Bordwell and Thomson (2001), for instance, distinguishes four levels of meaning (46–49), elaborates the ‘referential’ level of meaning with a model of narrative structures (38–90), and designates the level of images and sounds by the concept of style (155).

51 Torben Grodal here speaks of ‘intensities’ (1999: 59).

represented worlds.⁵² These ideas are interconnected; character models are embedded in situation models, situation models in world models. From a narratological point of view, the changes in the situation and character models during the course of reception correspond to plot and character development, which can be described more precisely by means of time structures (time arrow at the bottom of diagram).⁵³

The development and interaction of mental models has frequently been associated with the creation of illusion and—even quite physical—feelings of ‘immersion’, ‘presence’, or ‘transportation’, of plunging into the imaginary world as an observer or even a participant.⁵⁴ There are further connections with different kinds of diegetic emotions: the mental representations may trigger innate affect programmes, evoke affective associations and appraisals, or activate the emotional memory.⁵⁵ Basically, all mentally represented objects may become triggers of affects and emotions, whether they are situations (the farewell of Rick and Ilsa), represented beings (Rick), or passing details (Ilsa’s facial expression). The viewers can share the feelings of the characters through empathy; they can evaluate the characters in moral and other respects, and develop persistent emotional attitudes of sympathy or antipathy towards them. Some of these emotions are tied to the temporal sequence of mental models and consequently to associated expectations: viewers hope and fear for the characters (suspense: Can Rick help Ilsa to escape?), are surprised by them (Ilsa threatens Rick with a pistol!), or search for information in order to close gaps (curiosity: What happened between Rick and Ilsa in the past?). Depending how the situation develops—fulfilling or disappointing wishes—the spectators will react accordingly. Their affective arousal may then spill over onto subsequent situations (‘excitation transfer’; Zillmann 2005).

Beyond mental models and diegetic emotions, a third level of film experience comes into play: based on perceptions and sensations, viewers do not only construct imaginary worlds and events but also explore their figurative or higher-level meanings (see Chapter 11). These include various phenomena, which are treated under concepts like ‘theme’, ‘symbol’, or ‘metaphor’ in media studies, under the concept of ‘macro-proposition’ in Critical Discourse Analysis, and under the aspect of metaphorical thinking in cognitive science.⁵⁶ Up till now, this research has not been linked together; however, the phenomena in question show common features that justify their assignment

52 On the concept of mental model, cf. Johnson-Laird 1983, 1989; for some specifications from a philosophical perspective cf. Metzinger (1999: Chapter 2).

53 On the narratological conceptualisation of time structures in film, cf. Bordwell 1985a: Chapter 6; Eder 1999; a survey for literary studies is given in Martinez and Scheffel 1999: 27–47.

54 On illusion creation, cf. Voss 2006; on immersion, Ryan 2001 Thon 2007; on transportation, Green 2004.

55 Bartsch 2007 and Eder 2003a, 2007, 2018 attempt to integrate different theoretical positions on emotion into a more comprehensive model. Cf. also Hogan 2003a: 184.

56 On theories of thematics in general, see especially Bremond, Landy, and Pavel 1995; on metaphor: Knowles and Moon 2006; Hogan 2003a: Chapter 4; Kanzog 2001: §7; Fahlenbrach 2016; on levels of image comprehension: Scholz 2004; on themes as macro-propositions: van Dijk 1985 and later publications.

to one and the same level: they all cannot be assigned to objectless perception nor to the formation of concrete world models, but they either contain mental representations of more abstract or general states of affairs beyond the represented world (themes, macro-propositions), or they require cognitive processes of 'seeing-as', i.e., the apprehension of something concrete (an object or character) as a sign for something else or something more general (a theme, symbol, or metaphor). To put it simply, in all these cases something concretely perceptible or directly represented stands for something else. Themes or macro-propositions may be understood as higher-level meanings; more precisely as global representations, which may be directly mediated through language but are more frequently derived from perceptual impressions and world-models through generalising inferences.⁵⁷ For example, from Rick's development up to his magnanimous farewell from Ilsa, one can infer the general message that personal matters should be subordinated to the common good. Roughly speaking, indirect or higher meanings, as in the case of symbols, metaphors, allegories, allusions or irony, are inferred by a mental representation (e.g., of a character) interacting with memory contents and calling up further representations from another domain that share certain characteristics with it.⁵⁸ Viewers of *Casablanca* can, for instance, associate Rick with the USA (commonality: attitude towards Nazi terror), or viewers of Lang's *Destiny* (*Der müde Tod*) see the man in dark clothing as a personification of human dying (signifying that death is darkness, loss, weariness). The formation of such higher or inferred representations is again connected with feelings: thinking of dying may evoke sadness or activate emotional memories; a thematic attitude towards death can meet with approval or rejection. One may then speak of thematic emotions.

Again, we are not talking about a one-way-street of media experience here. The construction of the depicted world not only serves as a basis for exploring indirect meanings, but higher meanings and metaphorical thinking can in turn influence representations of the storyworld, for example when the theme of a film is already known from advertising and orients perception and cognition, or when melancholy music and a gloomy landscape are used to express the personality of a character. One may, however, speak of different levels of reception insofar as in the most cases, the represented world is earlier and more frequently used as the basis for significant thematic or symbolic inferences. These are, again, not conscious, logical conclusions, but heuristic activities of abductive information processing, which often emerge spontaneously and preconsciously on the basis of mental schemata, prototypes, and exempla.

Memory contents of this kind also underlie the more conscious, reflexive inferences of the fourth level of reception: communicative pragmatics (see Chapter 12). Here, all the kinds of information considered so far may be starting points for inferences: perceptual impressions, mental models of the storyworld, indirect meanings, and themes of the film. All of these can generate ideas about the elements involved in the film communication:

57 Cf. the specifications of theme in Brinker 1995; Rimmon-Kenan 1996.

58 Cf. Hogan 2003a: Chapter 4, esp. 107–14; Whittock 1990.

ideas about the film as artefact, the filmmakers, the spectators themselves, the other recipients, the contexts, causes, and effects of the communication process in sociocultural reality. The mental representation of these objects in 'context models of discourse' (van Dijk 2008) is connected with characteristic reflective or communicative emotions (Eder 2007a, 2018). A few examples. Viewers may feel ashamed that they found scenes of violence in the film fascinating, or proud of their ability to deeply empathise (meta-emotions; Bartsch 2007). They may begin to speculate on the film's effects on other viewers and start to worry about moral depravation or a collective blunting of sensibility. At the same time, they may form ideas about the filmmakers' personality and motivation, evaluate their intentions in terms of morality or politics (e.g., as sexist, racist, opportunistic), become angry about their irresponsibility, or wonder what social factors influenced them. Beyond that, they may analyse the film's formal qualities and come to admire the skilful acting or camerawork ('artefact-emotions'; Tan 1996). Processes of this kind form a heterogeneous field; their common features, however, consist in that the mental representations involved refer neither to the represented world nor to general meanings but to concrete elements of communicative processes in a sociocultural reality. They can thus all be assigned to one level.

Hence, both film structures and reception processes can be divided into four interrelated levels. On the first level, the film's images and sounds induce perceptual impressions that are linked with spontaneous affective reactions and moods. These perceptual and sensory impressions are further processed into mental models of a world filled with particular characters and events that evoke a broad spectrum of emotions, among them affective appraisals and recollections, curiosity, empathy, sympathy, or antipathy. On this basis, spectators infer indirect and higher-order meanings that go beyond the represented world and can be related affectively to their personal lives. And, finally, they subject the communicative process itself, its elements and contexts, to a reflection that includes aesthetic, moral, and self-related evaluations and corresponding emotions.

Some theorists seem to assume that the reception of mainstream narrative films is restricted to the first two levels, the perception of audiovisual stimuli and the storyworld. Empirical spectator surveys, reception documents, and precise self-observation all contradict this assumption (cf. Barker 2006). They suggest that in mainstream cinema attention may very well be focused on the represented world, but it also allows for the search for thematic meaning and reflection about communicative contexts. Interpretation, reflection, and further processing are usually already taking place during the reception itself and continue afterwards. With other forms of film production, for instance experimental films or modernist art cinema, this is even part of the declared intention of the filmmakers who, following Bertolt Brecht, demand an analytical attitude from the spectators.

This general model of film experience can be transferred to the narrower domain of character reception, which thus also comprises four steps.

1. Basic perceptions. The audiovisual information making up filmic character representations is perceived in various mostly pre- or subconscious, but empirically observable and neuronally describable, processes of sensory experience and perceptual information processing, which are subsequently connected with each other (e.g., in the visual cortex) in milliseconds, even before the conscious identification and categorisation of the perceived objects begins.⁵⁹ The perception of forms, colours, patterns, movements, and sounds forms the foundation and a continuous undercurrent of character reception. It produces percepts and affective reactions even before it finishes in identifying the character. The basal perceptual processes are objectless, but they prepare the formation of mental models, accompany it, and also enter into it. This is particularly apparent in moments of transition: the face of a character emerges out of a blurred background; a sudden movement becomes the movement of a body; a noise turns into a voice; a puzzling close-up shot shows the curve of a lip, the texture of a skin, or the inside of a brain (*Fight Club*). Such perceptual processes already carry an affective charge (Grodal 1999: 59) that can be associated with the character in question.
2. Formation of mental models. The perceived audiovisual information activates processes of understanding as well as contents of the memory and causes the spectators to begin developing character conceptions or, more precisely, mental models. This is a particular kind of mental representation, which integrates information from different sources into the total image of a represented being (e.g., Rick Blaine), and which naturally keeps changing in the course of the film (see Chapter 5).⁶⁰ Depending on what kind and how detailed this model is, the character can remain rather abstract or have a strong quasi-natural presence. The process of developing such representations is complex and can be further subdivided into the provisional identification of the being, its categorisation and contextual placement, the attribution of external features, and the completion of an elaborate mental model of the character's mind and social relationships (cf. Persson 2003: 28–30, 152). While neuroscientific studies have repeatedly shown that objects in images can be identified and roughly categorised within milliseconds, the development of character models generally requires considerably more time and cognitive effort. The spectators make use of their mental dispositions in order to construct a consistent model, to

59 On the kinds and levels of perception, cf. LeDoux 1996: 56–64; for the philosophical view, cf. Dretske 1969; for the psychological view, cf. the article 'Wahrnehmung' in Städtler 2003.

60 Definition and development of mental character models in literature have been extensively analysed and described by the Anglicist Ralf Schneider (2000); his precise presentation can be transferred to film with modifications. Later chapters of this book will treat this matter in more exact terms.

close gaps in the information, to build up expectations, to enable inferences, and to position the character in relational and situational models. The construction of the character model is closely linked to processes of 'identification' and cognitive and affective engagement with the depicted being. All in all, this level represents the core of character reception. While several theories have dealt with it rather extensively already (e.g., Smith 1995; Schneider 2000), the following important levels of reception have scarcely been taken into account.

3. Inference of higher-level or second-order meanings. Starting out from their mental model of a represented being, spectators can develop more abstract thoughts or associated meanings, for example that Rick stands for the USA in the Second World War or that he demonstrates the necessity of sacrificing personal interests for the greater good. In connection with cognitive theories of metaphor and discourse analysis, such indirect meanings can be related to partially preconscious inferences and considered to be products of associative metaphorical thinking or as thoughts about general thematic statements.⁶¹ The common features of such higher or indirect meanings are that the character model triggers (or becomes a part of) other, usually more complex or abstract, representations. In this way, the character can exemplify properties or represent ideas, embody virtues or vices, transport metaphors, function as a sign or symbol for something, serve as an allegory or personification, or convey more general topics (see Chapter 11).
4. Reflection on communicative contexts. Spectators can reflect on each one of the previous reception levels and make assumptions about their connections with the communicative reality (see Chapter 12). These inferences concern the production and reception of the character, its causes and effects, as well as its design as an artefact. Critics can question the motives of the filmmakers, censors speculate about the film's impact on particular audiences, other spectators may muse about their own reactions. The character model thus serves as a starting point for inferences on the totality of communicative and pragmatic contexts in reality, which are represented in the form of mental 'context models' (van Dijk 1998). These considerations are aimed at concrete and general causes and effects of characters in this reality, including the motives and attitudes of the participants in communication. The spectators, finally, can make the character the object of an aesthetic analysis and evaluation. They can, for instance, ask themselves why the character Rick is portrayed as he is, evaluate how Bogart plays the role, or search for other reasons for his fascinating effect on audiences.

61 Cf. e.g., Hogan 2003a: Chapter 4; van Dijk 1985.

The model of reception proposed here sets itself apart from other approaches through several assumptions. Character reception is not taken to be a one-dimensional, merely cognitive understanding of represented beings, but understood as a multifaceted process of cognitive, affective, embodied experiences that comprises not only the formation of mental models but also the sensory perception of textual signs (film images and sounds), the exploration of indirect and superordinate meanings, and the reflection on communicative contexts. The level of mental models is the core area to which the other levels either lead (perception) or upon which they build (superordinate meanings; communicative reflection). While perception and model building must be present if one wants to talk about character reception at all, this may not be required for the two higher levels. It is conceivable that superordinate meanings and pragmatic reflections do not play a role, or only a marginal one, in the reception process of certain films. Whether spectators are constantly aware of communication and fictionality is unclear; they can certainly also become absorbed in the perception of the fictional world. Most films, however, seem to activate all four levels of reception; it would therefore be a mistake to restrict the analysis to fictional worlds.

Each of the reception levels is internally complex and involves very different phenomena. Even basal perception of the film's material stimuli or signs, its images and sounds, is not only visual and auditive, but also triggers associations with other senses such as smell or touch (Antunes 2016). Mental models are included in diverse forms of the imagination: one may have the impression of seeing, hearing, even smelling represented beings (*Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*); one can guess at their innermost thoughts and feelings, hope and fear for them. That the field of indirect meanings is also structured in a complex way is clearly shown by the traditional distinctions between various kinds of rhetorical tropes such as symbol, allegory, metaphor, or metonymy. A wide variety of elements of communication may become objects of reflection, and the character model may be connecting with a correspondingly wide range of reflection. Multiple layers and internal complexity are exhibited not only by such cognitive processes, but also by the affective engagement in characters. Emotions and somatic effects induced by characters occur not only on the level of storyworld beings (identification, empathy, sympathy) but also through basal perception, thematic relations, and the reflection on real contexts.

Among further important features of character reception are its temporality and variability. On all four levels, character reception develops in time. Simultaneously, the attention of spectators may move back and forth between the levels. In the mainstream narrative film, represented beings are generally the main focus of reception, but experimental and auteur films demonstrate that characters can very well be regarded as sensual spectacles, symbols, expressions of personal feelings or symptoms of

sociocultural influences. Furthermore, all the levels are in constant interaction. Their arrangement in the model suggests a dominant bottom-up direction of reception—the lower levels are prerequisites for the higher ones—but the stream of reception does not only flow in this one direction. The higher levels also affect the lower ones, e.g., by focusing attention. Mental models direct perception (in philosophy and psychology, such influences are discussed as ‘cognitive penetration’ of perception), and their development itself is influenced by assumptions about thematic and other functions of characters.

This also suggests that ‘comprehension’ (as the unproblematic understanding of the represented world) and ‘interpretation’ (as the conscious application of more complex mental schemata) cannot be rigidly divided. Usually, for example, spectators already have some knowledge about the characters before reception, often gathered from criticism and other forms of interpretation. Many spectators of *Casablanca* know from the beginning that Rick will do certain things and fulfil thematic functions. Such pre-existing information may lead to the construction of a basic mental model of the character before watching the film and will influence the reception process. For this reason, understanding and interpretation cannot be confined to clearly separated processes of reception; their borders are blurred.

Characters are also experienced to varying degrees consciously or unconsciously, perceived as sensually concrete or reflected upon as meaningful. Depending on the extent to which spectators explore themes, decode symbols, or reflect on the communicative process and its contexts, one might speak of degrees of reflective meaningfulness of characters. Some characters are perceived as allegories, personifications, or mouthpieces of the filmmakers, others rather like real beings, or as visual and acoustic spectacles. Most processes of basal perception and mental model building will occur preconsciously, rapidly, automatically, uncontrollably, and without reflection. It would be overhasty, however, to assume that the processes of one reception level would per se always be conscious, preconscious, or unconscious. Even the perception of colours and forms can take place in a state of concentrated attention and aesthetic awareness, and even the exploration of complex themes or communicative backgrounds may happen in forms of spontaneous associations on the basis of conceptual metaphors.⁶² Thus there is a tendency of gradual increase in the degree of awareness from the lower levels to the upper levels of reception, rather than a principal line of division between conscious and unconscious processes.

Concentrating on the level of the represented world, one may state that character models integrate different kinds of ideas about physical, mental, and social features of characters and that they may therefore exhibit different degrees of abstraction or

62 On the theory of conceptual metaphors and preconscious, embodied metaphorical thinking, cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1999: Part I; Fahlenbrach 2016.

concretion. It is possible that a character model is predominantly composed of language-like propositions, e.g., when a character like Rick, at the beginning of *Casablanca*, is described exclusively in language. The character model can also integrate intensive sensory impressions like the sound of the voice or the visual perception of a close-up and thus in phases reach a high sensory presence. Character models may also be more or less concrete and detailed, depending on the input information.

The sensory concreteness of character models corresponds with reception phenomena that have been discussed under keywords like 'transportation', 'presence', 'illusioning', 'realism', or 'immersion' (Green 2004; Voss 2006; Thon 2007). The basis for immersion, the illusory 'transportation' into an imaginary world, is a shifting of attention to mental situation models that come with a strong sensory presence and—in the case of realism—largely match reality conceptions of spectators. The characters are usually central in this. The character model is positioned in the context of representations of the storyworld and its components; of particular importance in this respect are the character constellations and story events that the viewers grasp in situational models. More generally, characters are always contextualised; at every level of reception they are in the context of, and in close interaction with, further representations. Character models are formed out of perceptual impressions that are connected with other perceptions not directly involved in building character models. They are embedded in situation models and connected with schemata of stories and genres, with ideas about actors (such as star images) or other real persons (such as the spectators themselves, the filmmakers, or acquaintances resembling a character). Furthermore, character models are a starting point for the exploration of indirect and higher meanings and the film's themes, metaphors, and symbols. Communicative reflection also often refers to characters as components of the complete film. From the perspective of production, characters are not just positioned in such contexts of perception, narration, plot, character constellation, themes, symbols, metaphors, and real communication, but also fulfil particular dramaturgical functions (see Chapter 9 and Chapter 10).

The model of character reception outlined here proposes a general basic structure into which more specific assumptions can be fed. In this way, more plausible and differentiated hypotheses can be made about the reception of characters by certain groups of recipients by taking into account the specific mental dispositions of these groups. The model also offers clues as to how different structures of characters trigger certain types of perceptual, cognitive, and affective reception processes. Last but not least, it also provides a clearer picture of the objects and questions that a theory of characters should deal with. The following chapters will take a closer look at all this.

3.4 Consequences for the Analysis of Characters

The preceding considerations have far-reaching consequences for the analysis of characters, films, and media texts in general. Every analysis is based upon explicit or implicit presuppositions as to how its object is defined, how relevant data are selected and observations expressed, what methods, models, and concepts are employed, and what is accepted as evidence for analytical conclusions. The quest for a systematic foundation therefore involves the clarification of at least three fundamental questions:

- What phenomena are examined in the analysis of characters?
- What are the essential structures of these phenomena?
- What methods are best suited for their investigation?

The results achieved so far provide a foundation for answering these questions. They contradict several widely held assumptions by making clear, for instance, that character analysis investigates much more than just characters themselves, that the discourse about characters often hides something else, and that there are diverse forms and goals of the analysis, which require different methods. However, they also show that various theories identify common basic structures that provide an orientation for analysis. In the following, I will summarise (partly in the form of theses and tables) some considerations from the many years of research work that preceded the writing of this book, so that its focus can remain on analysis.

General Principles of Analysis

One might think that character analysis is limited to investigating, well, characters. But that would be too simple; the field of investigation would be far too narrow. To get to the characters, we also need to analyse reception and communication. The previous chapters have shown that characters are recognisable represented beings that are created as communicative constructs by producers, who use texts to evoke mental character models in recipients (such as Rick Blaine models through the film *Casablanca*). Intersubjective criteria for such mental models of characters and their properties are given by the rules and mental prerequisites of communication; whenever there is a dispute about the 'correct' understanding of the character Rick, these criteria can be invoked. All talk about characters is thus ultimately based on implicit normative abstractions about the ideal formation of the respective character models. In addition to the development of mental models, the reception of characters also operates on further levels: the basal perception of concrete text elements (images and sounds) and inferences to higher meanings as well as to real communication contexts (e.g., effects on an audience). Affective reactions take place on all these levels. On the basis of their

perceptions, viewers form a mental model of Rick, link it to ideas about themes and real contexts, and react with often complex emotions.

Each of these areas may be of interest, raise questions, and lead to controversial ideas. In practice, character analysis can frequently contribute to the exchange of different views, can help to solve misunderstandings and make conflicting reactions of viewers comprehensible. For these reasons alone, the task of analysis is certainly not only to reconstruct particular characters or ideal character models but, more generally, to clarify the different forms of character-related communication and reception on all levels:

Character analysis is the systematic investigation of individual characters as well as of all related aspects of texts, reception, and communication.

This definition refers, amongst other things, to character representations 'in the text' of a film and 'in the heads' of filmmakers and spectators. A basic model of character analysis should at least be able to capture, in a systematic way, the interrelations between the following aspects:

- represented beings and their features (characteristics of human and non-human beings);
- character representations in the text (means and structures of representation, such as language, acting, or editing);
- reception processes (perception, model formation, thematic inferences, reflection, affective reactions) and their products (character conceptions);
- dispositions of producers and recipients (e.g., cognitive and affective capabilities, reaction tendencies, memory-based character prototypes and schemata); and
- communicative contexts and rules (such as principles of cooperation and relevance).

The consideration of these aspects and their interrelationships does not remain constant within the analysis. The reason is that a further widespread assumption is incorrect, namely that character analysis always consists in the same kind of activity, pursues the same goals, and employs a uniform set of methods. It has become clear that characters, on the contrary, are analysed for quite different purposes and in very diverse practical contexts, for instance in media production, aesthetic evaluation, or sociocultural critique. The varying goals of analysis lead to different foci within the object domain and to different approaches and procedures. In brief:

The procedures employed by character analysis depend on its practical goals.

It would be desirable to develop a general model for character analysis, not least to facilitate exchange between different areas of practice. However, such a model of analysis would also need to be adapted to the specific aims, interests and practices of researchers. Such adaptations often presuppose a clear disciplinary division of labour with regard to concepts, methods, data, and types of information in the analysis: film studies and literary studies are considered competent to study the text, its structures, and characters on a semiotic basis; psychology and communication science are said to be responsible for the empirical study of reception processes and audience reactions. However, this type of disciplinary division presupposes that on the one hand there is a text with objectively describable content, structures and characters, and on the other hand there are recipients whose contingent reactions to these given stimuli can be captured using the empirical methods of psychology. However, both views do not apply in this form, because text content and characters cannot simply be claimed to be pre-existent. They are already products of a communicative negotiation process about the 'correct' reception, perception, and model formation and can ultimately only be described objectively through the reconstruction of these processes. It can therefore be asserted:

Every form of character analysis presupposes at least implicit models of reception and communication.

Previously, I proposed a model of character reception based on cognitive theories, which can now also serve in developing a clearer idea of character analysis. Within representational communication, e.g., when watching a film, a large part of the reception process, especially perception and mental modelling, takes place spontaneously, preconsciously, and nonverbally. However, as soon as one begins to talk about the film and its characters, one enters the level of meta-representational communication, the realm of conscious verbalisation and reflection on representational communication, its processes, and results. Character analysis does nothing fundamentally different from talking about characters in everyday life, only on the basis of clear concepts, exact data, and methodical observation. An essential task of character analysis is therefore the well-founded reconstruction and explanation of the processes and products of communication and character reception.

The advantages of such a foundation become apparent if we look at attempts to grasp objective textual meanings (including characters) only through semantics. Every kind of semantics ultimately rests on strong abstraction. Models of semantic analysis that exclusively concentrate on textual structures, intersubjective codes, or rules of meaning always involve a drastic simplification of communicative pragmatics and

reception. Such a simplification is sensible at times in order to make complex issues manageable, but it inevitably leads to the neglect or distortion of essential aspects. The approach to character analysis proposed here re-evaluates such aspects, for instance the way films steer the reception process; the affective and bodily experiences of spectators; biological, cultural, and individual prerequisites of reception; differences in the experience of different individuals and social groups, as well as connections between medial and non-medial environments.

Semantic positions, as a rule, restrict themselves to the cognitive aspect of 'denotative' textual meanings and thus exclude bodily processes of experience, affects, associations, and 'connotative' or indirect meanings. Furthermore, they essentially presuppose an ideal spectator when trying to establish meanings, generally an able-bodied (male) middle-class adult, with a particular basic set of mental dispositions and communicative capabilities, and whose cognitive processes operate largely untouched by emotions. The diverse reactions of real spectators cannot be registered this way, and thus no mutual understanding among them can be fostered. Therefore, a semantic approach is unsuited, at least for narrative and sociocultural analysis.

Furthermore, the idea that the meanings and structures of texts are something objectively given and can be analysed using semantic methods alone has already been questioned by reception aesthetics and constructivist approaches in literary and media studies. The aesthetics of reception assumed that every text only conveys basic information explicitly, but always contains 'gaps' that have to be filled in individually by the recipient (Ingarden 1972; Iser 1994). The poetic image introduced to illustrate this idea was the starry sky, in which the spectators must discover the constellations themselves. Constructivism, on the other hand, claimed more fundamentally that even the stars in the sky, i.e., the 'explicit' textual elements, are nothing other than constructions of the viewers. Accordingly, talking about text structures, including the characters and their properties, would ultimately only be a shorthand for presenting ideal reception results. For every description of texts—except a purely physical one—implicitly already presupposes certain reception processes as given. Whoever speaks of Rick Blaine presupposes at least that the character models of the communication partners represent a congruent represented being with the same identifiable features.

Older constructivist approaches still resembled traditional semantics in several ways. They distinguished, for instance, between the comprehension of a text and its interpretation. Fundamental levels of meaning (e.g., the reception levels of perception and mental model formation) were seen as principally comprehensible. According to this view, the represented world and its characters would be objectively given for the viewers, who are also conceived in terms of ideal types. Higher-level meanings and inferences about the filmmakers and their contexts, by contrast, are considered subjective and problematical, requiring 'interpretation'. The two cognitive levels (comprehension and interpretation) were, in addition, considered to be separated from affective processes.⁶³

63 Cf. e.g., Bordwell's description of the spectator and his distinction between comprehension and

The discussion so far shows, however, that both the restriction to an ideal-type recipient and the strict separation of comprehension and interpretation, as well as of cognition and emotion, must be rejected (see also Chapter 11 and Chapter 12). If character analysis aims to improve the understanding between different positions, then it must be able to explain how and why concrete spectators react (often differently) to characters. In addition, scientific findings show that cognition and emotion are closely interconnected.⁶⁴ Consequently, the thesis that ‘comprehension’ of the represented world is essentially unproblematic is untenable. Even if the ‘explicit’, consensual information of a text can be identified, it is still always supplemented by individual inferences that are at least partly shaped by affects and emotions. Film editing may, for instance, leave out events that the viewers fill in in various ways through their imagination. Such inferences depend on culturally and individually divergent, partly affective, dispositions and therefore often lead to varying results. Characters, in particular, show that the sphere of ‘comprehension’ is anything but simple. It would certainly be absurd to dispute the facts that Rick owns a café and has dark hair. However, disagreement about the mental and social qualities of characters is common, often even about physical actions. It is therefore possible to argue about whether Rick and Ilsa sleep with each other in *Casablanca* or not, whether they truly love each other, or why Rick lets Ilsa go (cf. e.g., Maltby 1996). It may thus be generally asserted:

Character analysis takes into account the interplay between cognition and affect and avoids a general separation of allegedly problematic and unproblematic reception levels (e.g., comprehension and interpretation).

Any misgivings that film and media studies would lose its identity as a discipline or be encroached on by media psychology if it based its analyses on reception theory are unwarranted. Grounding character analysis on reception theory does not mean it should deal only with empirically observable reception processes or should rely entirely on methods from empirical psychology. Film analysis is not reducible to psychology (as Persson 2003 occasionally seems to suggest), already because it does not occupy itself only with the experience of concrete present-day spectators. At least three different kinds of reception phenomena may be foregrounded in film analysis, which correspondingly require different procedures for data collection and analysis:⁶⁵

interpretation as well as between referential, explicit, implicit and symptomatic meaning (Bordwell 1989). For criticism of concepts of the ideal spectator, cf. Staiger 1992.

64 Cognitions are always affectively tuned, emotions have cognitive components. Cognitions trigger emotions and vice versa; emotions direct even basal perception and influence all further information processing (Eder and Keil 2005a; Eder, Hanich, and Staiger 2019).

65 This distinction between forms of reception shows parallels to the distinction between different constructs of recipients, cf. e.g., Janet Staiger 1992, and in literary studies Wolfgang Iser 1994: 50–67.

- the empirical reception of concrete spectators and audiences in the past, the present, or the future (how was or is Rick actually or probably understood and experienced at a certain point in time by certain people?);
- the reception intended by producers in the past (how should Rick be understood and experienced according to the filmmakers?); and
- the ideal reception, which is normative and only indirectly tied to the producers' intentions and target audiences (how should Rick be comprehended and experienced in the context of communicative rules and action goals in an ideal way, i.e., according to certain criteria of optimal experience and interpretation?).

These three perspectives on phenomena of reception become relevant in different practical contexts. Ideal and intended reception are mostly objects of interpretation in media studies. By contrast, empirical reception is the object of practice-led analyses in media production; investigation in regard to psychological experiments, history, discourse analysis, or cultural theory; and predictions about effects in the social sciences and law.⁶⁶ The thesis on the connection between character analysis and character reception can now be stated more precisely:

Character analysis can be based on assumptions about different kinds of reception: about the intended, ideal, or empirical character reception in the past, present, or future.

Consequently, every form of character analysis is based on reception, but not always in the same way. The goal of the analysis will determine which specific models, methods, and data are employed. This distinguishes the approach described here from purely psychological or phenomenological theories. While both psychology and phenomenology may play important roles in the analysis of characters, the approach outlined here is more encompassing and makes their different perspectives visible and comparable.

Phenomenology, the thick description of one's own subjective experience, provides an indispensable starting point for analysing most forms of character reception. However, it is limited to first-person accounts of viewers who present their own experience to others for discussion, and omits certain data and methods necessary to substantiate claims that go beyond this subjective experience. Therefore, it is not possible for phenomenology alone to make well-founded statements about the

⁶⁶ The distinction between empirical, intended, and ideal reception is consistent with current theories. Cultural studies, for example, distinguishes between hegemonial, negotiated, and oppositional readings of a text, which represent different forms of empirical and hypothetical reception.

empirical reception of other people. Psychology, on the other hand, becomes important exactly when trying to determine this empirical reception by combining scientifically tested theories with solid information about actual recipients and their dispositions. For this purpose, psychological theories prove to be essential. However, they do not necessarily have to be fed with empirical data, and in many cases, it will even be impossible to acquire such data. If, for example, a prediction is to be made about the likely experience of a character by a target group in the future, one could obviously not conduct a survey of their reactions, but only work with assumptions about the mental dispositions of this group.

Moreover, neither phenomenology nor psychology are sufficient to determine forms of intended or ideal reception. If one is interested in the intended reception, then a psychological or other scientific theory is of little use; instead, the focus here must be on the producers' implicit, pre-scientific ideas of how reception works, based on their everyday knowledge and their conception of the target group. Both will not necessarily correspond to scientific standards and can usually only be derived from biographies or production documents. The most complex case is the ideal reception; here, both the intentions of the producers and the dispositions of their target group must be evaluated together on the basis of the communication situation, its norms, and criteria of success.⁶⁷

Consequently, arguments and methods in analysing characters may be based not only on different models of reception, but also on different types of information about producers, recipients, and their communication. In addition to the media text, various other data may need to be used to conduct and substantiate an analysis. The amount of data that can be collected and evaluated using social and natural science methods (as preferred by many cognitive and psychological theories) is limited. For example, data on empirical reception can be collected through experiments, questionnaires, interviews or focus groups, but usually only with a high workload of the researchers, for a limited number of viewers, only a posteriori, and under different conditions than the natural reception situations (watching a film in a laboratory is different from watching it in the cinema). In addition, empirical psychology reaches its limits when future, past, intended, or ideal reception is the subject of the study. In such cases, qualitative and interpretative methods beyond psychology must be used to obtain data. For example, if you want to assess how an audience might react in the future when a film is made, you can only make general probability assumptions about the situations and dispositions of the target group. If you are interested in the reception of films in the past, you have to work with historical methods and corresponding sources, for example written reviews, fan discourses or reports of

67 The reconstruction of an ideal reception process is even more complicated because recipients can (or should) take into account the intentions of the producers, which creates feedback loops. A methodical approach to ascertaining ideal meanings has been suggested by the school of objective hermeneutics in social science (cf. e.g., Overmann 2002).

all kinds. A predominantly historical approach can also support reconstructions of the reception intended by the producers; data can then be obtained in particular from production documents such as interviews with filmmakers, diaries, production notes and the like. In all these cases, different data and methods are required than in empirical psychology.

Analysing ideal reception—and thus also the characters themselves and their properties—is the most complicated undertaking, partly because it depends on which of the various theories of meaning and interpretation in philosophy and textual studies one follows. Here I can only say that I follow neither a purely author-intentional nor a purely reception-oriented theory of meaning, but one that is based on communicative pragmatics.⁶⁸ Accordingly, meaning (including characters) cannot be reduced to either its ‘encoding’ or its ‘decoding’ in Stuart Hall’s terms (2003). Instead, the analyst must find out what communicative rules and conventions were in force in the original communication, what goals the producers and the recipients were pursuing, what their positions were in the communication process, and what mental dispositions and communicative knowledge they possessed. The relevant communicative rules may be as general as the Gricean conversational implicatures (Grice 1989) or the principle of relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1995), but may also be quite specific and related to certain text types, genres, or subtle, affective dispositions of authors and audiences.⁶⁹ As all meaning is ultimately normative in this sense, analysing the ideal reception of characters must consider communicative practice in its specific, situated normativity. Psychological models that equate meaning with individual mental representations are unsuitable for this task, because they cannot account for the pragmatic and normative aspects of communication.

To briefly summarise the central result: psychological or phenomenological theories of reception can be used for some purposes of character analysis, but not for all (especially not for the analysis of ideal or intended character reception). Moreover, in many cases it is not sufficient to use psychological or phenomenological methods to collect the data on which the analysis is based. For these reasons, character analysis cannot be reduced to either psychological or phenomenological approaches. An approach that takes communicative pragmatics and cognitive-representational theories of reception as its starting point and, depending on the issue at hand, incorporates different, mostly qualitative methods and data appears more comprehensive and more suitable overall.

The following table gives a summary of the prerequisites for a successful analysis of the relevant phenomena of reception (Table 2).

68 For more on that, see my book *Was sind Figuren?* (2008a) and Part VI of this book.

69 Different concepts in this connection have been developed by Oevermann 2002 and Jannidis 2004.

Object of investigation	Basic theoretical models, methods, and data
Empirical reception in the present	Scientific models of reception (e.g., from psychology or sociology) / phenomenological description of reception Information on contemporary recipients and reception situations (e.g., from demography, observation, descriptions by participants) Empirical data (experiments, surveys, measurements, etc.)
Empirical reception in the past	Scientific models of reception (e.g., from psychology or sociology) / phenomenological description of reception Information on historical recipients and reception situations (e.g., from historiography) Historical reception documents (criticism, etc.)
Empirical reception in the future	Scientific models of reception (e.g., from psychology or sociology) / phenomenological description of reception Information on future target groups and probable reception situations (e.g., from marketing scenarios)
Intended reception	(Implicit) folk-theoretical model of reception held by producers / phenomenological description of reception Information on producers and production situations (e.g., from historiography, biographies) Production documents (interviews with producers, advertising, etc.)
Ideal reception	Scientific models of reception / phenomenological description of reception Information on producers, their model of reception, and their intentions Information on target groups, their perspectives and interests (e.g., enjoyment, education, etc.) Information on original communication and valid communicative rules and conventions (e.g., from social semiotics) Normative criteria for optimal experiences (e.g., from theories of interpretation)

Table 2 Objects, data, and methodological starting points of analysing characters and their different modes of reception

However data and procedures may differ, textual interpretation and phenomenological description remain essential, although rarely explicit, prerequisites in all forms of character analysis (including empirical psychological ones). In many cases, other adequate data are not available. In other cases, the data themselves need to be interpreted, and although talking about characters is often a shorthand way of talking about ideal reception, it is often less problematic than interpreting the historical production documents or empirical

experiments intended to support analytical statements about characters. Thus, in any analysis, one must see where the greatest demands of explanation and justification lie. In view of the multitude of possible objects of investigation, reception phenomena, and associated models, methods, and data, one can say:

Any systematic character analysis needs to be able to explain to what extent it refers to empirical, intended, or ideal character reception in the past, present, or future, and how the chosen reception theories, methods, and data can lead to adequate results in this context.

As outlined above, character reception can be divided into the four levels of basal perception, mental modelling, thematic inferences, and communicative reflection. When analysing characters, certain aspects on these levels are often taken as given (e.g., the characters’ external appearance). Further statements about more controversial aspects (e.g., mental states or symbolic meanings) are then made on this basis. Often, viewers also continue to think about characters long after the immediate reception process. This post-receptive or post-filmic elaboration can involve all levels. After the film, we can further develop our mental model of the character, for example by trying to understand the character’s motives better than was possible while watching the film. We can focus on the higher meanings and communicative functions of the character and look for further information, for example about the filmmakers or cultural contexts. Or we can think further about the aesthetics of the character, the forms and techniques of their representation and related sensory experiences. Such types of elaboration are based on reception, but usually take place in social interactions that are influenced by the goals and social roles of certain groups of viewers, such as critics, connoisseurs, or fans.

In summary, the features of the proposed approach to character analysis may best be clarified by contrasting them with a simplified ‘standard approach’ of analysis (see Table 3).

	‘Standard approach’ of analysis	Proposed new approach of analysis
Goals of analysis	Only one (usually interpretation)	Various, among them creative production, interpretation for art appreciation, sociocultural evaluation and critique
Theoretical foundations	Semantics	Communicative pragmatics and reception theory

Object of study	Particular characters	All character-related communication processes and their products
Status of textual meanings	Objectively given	Dependent on communication and reception
Focus	Textual structures	Processes and products of reception and their elaboration
Forms of reception investigated	No distinction, usually orientated towards intended reception	Empirical, intended, ideal reception in past, present, or future
Levels of reception	No clear distinction	Perception, model formation, theme-related, and communicative inferences
Relationship between cognition and emotion	Separation, restriction to cognition	Interlinking cognition and emotion
Relationship between comprehension and interpretation	Separation, comprehension not problematised	Interrelated, comprehension contains interpretative components
Relationship between cultural studies and social sciences	Separate disciplines and areas of competence	Problem-related interdisciplinary cooperation

Table 3 Differences between the approach to character analysis proposed in this book and the usual 'standard approach' (simplified)

The relevance of these distinctions for practical analysis may be illustrated by an example. A core area of character analysis is the psychology of characters, the ascription of mental properties. Psychoanalysis exerts great influence in this field. Some psychoanalytically oriented scholars (e.g., Gabbard and Gabbard 1990) might, for instance, claim that Rick Blaine's personality and his behaviour are shaped by an Oedipus complex, and that he finds himself repeating an Oedipal situation: Ilsa takes the position of the desired mother, his rival Laszlo the position of the overpowering father against whom Rick nurtures a death wish, until he finally manages to overcome it. If this interpretation is challenged, the psychoanalysts (like anyone ascribing properties to a character) would have to offer arguments for their thesis and reveal its implicit presuppositions. In light of the theoretical discussion thus far, we now can easily see that such theses about characters' psychology are based on a whole range of presuppositions and are highly ambiguous. Taking the distinction between empirical, intended, and ideal reception into account, it becomes apparent this claim about Rick can have at least three basically different meanings. We are actually dealing with three different theses, each of which is derived differently and which, if questioned, would also have to be substantiated differently in each case.

The first meaning could be that past or present viewers consider Rick to be an Oedipal character. This case of empirical reception could be verified by examining relevant reception documents; presumably they would show that only a small group of psychoanalytically informed individuals explicitly regard Rick as Oedipal. In the absence of such documents, the film could be linked to the psychological dispositions of the viewers in question. If the viewers are familiar with the concept of the Oedipus complex and Rick's behaviour in the film fits this concept, it could be assumed that Rick is indeed seen as Oedipal. As most viewers will probably not be familiar with the concept, it could also be that they unconsciously recognise and share Rick's Oedipal trajectory because they have had such experiences themselves. However, this would require a psychoanalytic theory of reception that is incompatible with many other theories. Ultimately, this theory would be the dividing point between a psychoanalytic and other views of Rick's personality and would therefore have to be justified itself.

Secondly, the Oedipus thesis could also refer to the intended reception instead of the empirical reception of the characters. In this case, it would not be a statement about the real viewers, but would mean that the filmmakers wanted to give their audience the impression of Rick's Oedipal personality. To test this thesis, one could try to find out from production documents whether the filmmakers were actually influenced by psychoanalysis (like, for instance, Woody Allen or Jane Campion), whether they assumed their target audience had prior psychoanalytic knowledge, or whether they unconsciously gave Rick Oedipal traits (in which case one would have to apply a psychoanalytic model to creative processes).

The third possibility might be that the thesis of Rick's Oedipal personality was meant normatively rather than descriptively, thus referring to an ideal character reception in the sense that Rick should ideally be understood as Oedipally conditioned. 'Ideally' could here be understood in such a way as to open up a new, interesting, and illuminating perspective on Rick and the film. This would leave open alternative visions of Rick. But it could also be meant in the more strongly normative sense that an optimal communication process would lead to understanding Rick as having an Oedipal personality. This could only be judged by relating the communicative norms and goals of the producers and their target group with one another in a specific reception situation. On the one hand, the intentions of the producers play a role here: Did the filmmakers want Rick to be understood in this way? On the other hand, it would be of relevance to know whether the spectators were able to form this particular image of Rick on the basis of the film, their mental dispositions (e.g., knowledge of psychoanalysis), and valid communicative norms and contexts (e.g., the Production Code).

With all due caution, one may suspect that an explicitly Oedipal understanding of Rick is not supported by any unambiguous indication from empirical, intended, or ideal reception. If Rick is (or should be) implicitly experienced in this way, then a particular psychoanalytical model of reception must be presupposed. In this case, the

sustainability of the thesis depends on the plausibility of a psychoanalytical reception model. Ultimately, the dispute about characters thus turns out to be a dispute about spectators and their dispositions.

The example can be generalised and draws attention to a fundamental problem of character analysis. Analyses in everyday language and in the language of media studies produce many apparently simple and trivial statements about characters (as about Rick above). It has become clear, however, that such statements often cover only a part of the analysis or that they are ambiguous and rest on presuppositions in need of clarification. Frequently they hide statements about forms of character reception whose derivation and justification require different procedures and data.

The most precise procedure of analysis would now consist in the detailed reconstruction of the relevant phenomena of reception and all their presuppositions. However, this procedure would be extremely laborious and in general unnecessarily complicated. Speaking about 'characters', by contrast, allows us to act more efficiently and simply: characters and their properties can be seen as the products of successful reception and elaboration. Then one implicitly presupposes that perception and mental model formation are carried out for the most part in an intersubjectively unproblematic manner. It is presupposed that the spectators' reception processes are largely comparable in that they construct a sufficiently similar mental model of a represented being with particular identifiable properties. Accordingly, all competent spectators develop similar images of Rick Blaine and thus consensually identify the same fictional being. These core features of ideal character models form the implicit basis of all discourse about characters. Then statements may be added that are based on a richer set of presuppositions. The simplification achieved by speaking about characters (and not individual character models or diverse reception processes) thus consists primarily in that fundamental processes of perception and model formation can simply be presupposed and the analysis may immediately start out from a higher level of observation.

Although statements about characters can ultimately be referred back to statements about character reception, in most cases it is much simpler just to speak of characters. One should, however, remain aware that this way of speaking is often ambiguous and contains a simplifying abstraction that can be re-examined critically whenever necessary. The distinctions suggested here will help to reveal such simplifications, ambiguities, and implicit presuppositions, and thus clear up misunderstandings that frequently arise through the confusion of empirical, intended, and ideal reception in the past, the present, and the future or between creative, interpretative, and sociocultural analyses. In brief:

Statements about characters often permit a useful simplification of more complex states of affairs, which can be made explicit in the analysis whenever needed.

It has thus become clear that making and substantiating statements about characters frequently needs to refer to theories of reception and communication, as well as to different kinds of methods and data. It appears reasonable, therefore, to proceed in an inter- or transdisciplinary way in character analysis and to consider research results from humanities as well as natural and social sciences. The transdisciplinary basis that I developed in the previous chapters has its foundations in the analytic philosophy of language and meaning (modelling the ontology of characters), in linguistic, semiotic, and philosophical pragmatics (modelling the communicative constitution of characters), and in the cognitive sciences, particularly in psychology and philosophy of mind (modelling the reception of characters). The recourse to these theories proved necessary and opportune because they provide the most thorough answers to the questions of what characters are and how they are constituted and experienced. This foundation has, on the one hand, made possible the more precise definition of the subject matter of character analysis. On the other hand, it lays out the basic outlines of a cognitivist reception model that can be linked to methods and data in the form of textual and phenomenological descriptions, empirical investigations, historical information, and others, in order to develop and support assertions about characters and both empirical, intended, and ideal character reception.

Facets of the Character as an Object of Study

The upshot of these considerations is, put simply: whenever we talk about characters, we talk about more than just characters. Moreover, often it is not even clear what we are talking about. This causes a problem for analysis. On the one hand, using simplified statements about characters enables us to proceed economically and to use ordinary language. On the other hand, more exact analyses may require the reconstruction of different forms and aspects of character reception. A way out of this dilemma is to continue speaking about characters in the analysis as usual, but provide precise clarification whenever necessary.

It is obviously necessary to orientate the analysis towards basic structures of the object. The four-level model of character reception offers such a fundamental structure: the distinction between perception, the formation of character models, the association of higher meanings, and the reflection on contexts in sociocultural reality. Each of these areas can be further differentiated. The question is now whether basic structures of the characters themselves correspond to this general configuration. This would not only make it easier to make more precise statements about characters in connection with their reception, it would also be a prerequisite for applying various concepts of character research and integrating them into a more comprehensive model of analysis. After all, most character theories merely produce statements about characters, without considering their hidden ambiguity or problems of reception. It is therefore necessary to compare three areas with regard to shared fundamental structures: the everyday

discourse about characters, the discourse of character theory and research, and the processes of character reception. It will become apparent that such a comparison is indeed capable of revealing fundamental structural commonalities between these areas.

It is best to start with statements about characters. Both in everyday talk about characters and in professional discourse about them, we ascribe to them certain properties (Rick Blaine has dark hair, is cool, complex, etc.) and relations to other objects (Rick loves Ilsa, is played by Bogart, stands for the USA, etc.).⁷⁰ The wide and varied range of such statements can be subdivided by classifying their predicates, relations, and objects, thus revealing four basic structural dimensions of characters. At the same time, crucial commonalities between various theories of film, literature, and art, as well as various approaches in aesthetics, semantics, and narratology, become apparent. They all suggest a division of character-related statements into four areas, which show striking and by no means coincidental correspondence to the four levels of character reception outlined above. It is not easy to find a convincing terminology for these general structural areas; I shall speak of characters as represented beings, symbols, symptoms, and artefacts.⁷¹

1. The character as a represented being (see the more detailed Chapter 5, Chapter 6, and Chapter 9). Statements belonging to this area answer the question: 'What is this character—what properties and relations does it have as a being in a represented (story)world?' This includes its physical, mental, and social features, its behaviour, fleeting experiences, and relations with its environment. Rick Blaine, for example, is of medium height, cynical, sentimental, and in relations with other characters ('loves Ilsa'), objects ('hides two transit visas'), times and places ('lives above his café'), events ('supports Ilsa's escape'), and abstract rules ('violates orders of the Vichy government'). What such statements have in common is that they concern characters as parts of a represented world and in many cases also as parts of a story. Represented worlds and their inhabitants are treated in theories of mimesis, diegesis, or narrative worlds, among others. Thus, one could also speak of the mimetic, diegetic, or representational dimension of characters. In philosophical semantics, one speaks of 'intra-fictional' statements about characters (Künne 1983: 295ff.), which may be prefixed by a fiction operator, e.g., 'according to the story, Rick loves Ilsa'. This test according to the logic of language does not, however, yield meaningful statements in connection with the following statement forms.

70 Predicate logic distinguishes between statements about properties and statements about relations. The former fit the schema 'Ef' ('The character f has the property E'), the latter the schema 'fRx' ('The character f stands in relation R to object x'). Some statements are also relational without appearing to be so.

71 The terminology was inspired by, amongst others, Ed Tan's suggestion of 'artefact-emotions' (1996) and by Bordwell's suggestion of a 'symptomatic' level of meaning (1989).

2. The character as a symbol (see Chapter 11). Statements of this kind answer the question: 'What does the character stand for—what indirect meanings does it convey?' Characters can function as the bearers of themes, metaphors, personifications, or exempla, in brief: as complex secondary signs that stand for something else. 'Symbol' is here understood in a broad sense and refers to all forms of higher-level, second-order, or indirect meaning. Allegorical characters are only the most significant examples: a man in dark clothing stands for Death (e.g., in *Destiny*). In interpretation, characters are often linked with indirect meanings, e.g., 'Rick symbolises the transformation from egoism to responsibility' or 'Rick stands for integrity'. What a character stands for usually depends on its features as a represented being: a character not only *has* particular problems, virtues, or vices, but *exemplifies* these as abstract qualities, embodies them in a metaphorical way, or contributes to conveying general statements about them. How this happens is treated by, amongst others, theories of symbolism, metaphor, and themes; one could accordingly also speak of the symbolic, metaphorical, or thematic dimension of characters.
3. The character as a symptom (see Chapter 12). Statements of this kind answer the questions: 'Why is the character as it is, what factors played a causal role in its production, and what effects does it have on its audiences and beyond?' Here, calling the character a 'symptom' does not mean something pathological, it means quite generally that it may be considered an indicator of states of affairs in reality, a phenomenon of culture and society, in particular with reference to communicative and media contexts. To put it more precisely, characters are ultimately ascribed causal relations with elements of the communication process, especially with recipients ('Rick was a moral model for many spectators'), with producers ('Rick was fashioned by several authors'), with other media texts ('Rick recalls Bogart's earlier gangster parts'), and with sociocultural and historical contexts ('Rick embodies a contemporary ideal of masculinity'). Such connections have been investigated by, amongst others, theories on *auteurs*, *dispositifs* (frameworks) of media production and distribution, media effects, intertextuality, and the pragmatics of communicative interaction; one could accordingly also speak of the context-related or pragmatic dimension of characters.⁷²

⁷² As mentioned in an earlier footnote, the Foucauldian term 'dispositif' is hard to translate into English. Broadly, it refers to 'a framework in which techniques and humans are arranged to make it possible to perform repetitive and distributed activities' (Larroche 2019: xv). In German media theory, the term 'Mediendispositiv' ('media dispositif') is widely used to talk about a medium such as television as an arrangement of technologies, organisations, professional roles, aesthetic conventions, and other elements that together enable certain forms of communication and establish certain power relations (e.g., Hickethier 2003).

4. The character as an artefact (see Chapter 7 and Chapter 8). Statements of this kind answer the question ‘How is the character designed and presented, and what aesthetic structures does it possess?’ Such statements about the ‘make-up’ of characters and their relationships with a media text or artwork will occupy an important position in the analysis. Characters are here ascribed relations with means of their (re)presentation (‘Rick is often shown in close-up shots’) as well as with roles and functions in narrative or rhetorical structures (‘Rick as the protagonist drives the action’). In addition, such features of characters are bundled together under generalising artefact properties (‘Rick is a multidimensional, idealised character typical of classical storytelling’). Traditionally, statements of this kind are made by aesthetic and narrative theories of the form, style, and experience of art,⁷³ so that one could here also speak of the aesthetic, textual, or stylistic dimension of characters.

The variety of statements in character analysis can thus be classified into these four groups: from a diegetic perspective we can discuss them as represented beings, from a thematic perspective as symbols, from a pragmatic perspective as symptoms, and from an aesthetic perspective as artefacts. Each area is complex, involving a large variety of properties, relations, and objects of reference. The following chapters will introduce differentiated models and concepts for investigating them.

Level of reception	Mental model formation	Association of indirect, higher-order meanings	Inferences about real communication phenomena	1) Basal perception 2) Aesthetic reflection
Aspect of character	Diegetic: fictional or represented being	Thematic: symbol	Pragmatic: symptom	Aesthetic: artefact
Basic question	<i>What is represented?</i> What properties does the character have as a represented being?	<i>What does the character stand for?</i> What indirect meanings does it convey?	<i>Why is the character as it is?</i> What causes and effects does it have in reality?	<i>How is the character represented?</i> What means, structures, and strategies are employed? What basic perceptual experiences are induced?

⁷³ Cf. e.g., Martinez and Scheffel 1999; Bordwell and Thompson 2001: 155.

Ascribed properties	Diegetic properties in a storyworld	Thematic, symbolic, and metaphoric relations	Contextual relations with reality (of communication)	Representational relations with means and structures of the text (character representations)
Relata	Elements of the represented world	Abstract themes, properties, propositions, etc.	Communicative contexts and their elements	Textual elements
Counterparts in character theory (Phelan 1989)	Mimetic dimension	Thematic dimension	-----	Synthetic dimension
Counterparts in narratology (Martinez/Scheffel 1999)	<i>What</i> is narrated: diegesis, story	<i>What</i> is narrated: themes	-----	<i>How</i> the story is narrated: form, discourse
Counterparts in theories of meaning (Bordwell 1989)	Referential meaning	Explicit and implicit meanings	Symptomatic meaning	Film form and style

Table 4 Fundamental structures of character analysis and their equivalents in different theories of film and literary studies

This classification is grounded in a number of ways (for an overview see Table 4). It corresponds to established categories of mimesis, symbolism, pragmatics, and aesthetics, and it takes up the central questions of all textual analysis: What objects are represented in what ways, for what reasons, and with what effects? In addition, it fits with several theoretical criteria that all point in the same direction. Firstly, the statements of each area have their own semantic and logical structure, which becomes apparent through linguistic indicators. As represented beings, characters possess particular properties ‘according to the story’; as symbols they ‘stand for something’; as symptoms they ‘allow for inferences’ about causes and effects, as artefacts they are ‘presented and formed by the text’. In all of the four perspectives, characters are related to specific objects with a distinct ontological status: to storyworlds, abstract meanings, real production and reception contexts, and textual forms and structures. Thus, the dimensions of characters refer to different elements of communication: the media

text, different levels of its meaning (represented worlds, higher-level meanings), and the communicative situation. These basic categories are supported further by their correspondence to other theories of character,⁷⁴ narrative,⁷⁵ textual motivation and information,⁷⁶ the philosophical explication of fictional statements,⁷⁷ and levels of meaning in film and art.⁷⁸

The proposed classification is thus substantiated by a meta-theoretical comparison and triangulation. However, it is more comprehensive than the individual theories mentioned. It allows for supplements, links, differentiations, amplifications. In particular, it interlocks with the theory of reception, since all four kinds of analytical statements about characters correspond to levels of character reception. In the first three cases, the relationship is clear. Statements about characters as represented beings imply the formation of mental character models: the statement 'Rick is cool' presupposes that the model of a cool man called Rick is developed (or should be developed). Statements about characters as symbols imply inferences about higher meanings: the statement 'Rick stands for the USA' presupposes that the model of Rick is or should be connected with a particular idea of the USA. Statements about characters as symptoms imply inferences about communicative contexts: the statement 'Rick influenced the contemporary audience' presupposes that the model of Rick is or should be connected with an image of the audience and the impact on it.

74 Phelan (1989) distinguishes between the mimetic, the thematic, and the synthetic dimensions of a character, which largely correspond with the aspects of the represented being, the symbol, and the artefact. Margolin (1990: 106) considers characters as non-real individuals in fictional worlds (fictional beings), as thematic elements (symbols), as topical entities of discourse (symptoms or artefacts), and as artificial constructs (artefacts); he then concentrates on the first of these aspects.

75 Here the *what* is distinguished from the *how* of a narrative, i.e., the represented content (*story*) from its mode of representation in *plot* or *discourse*. The level of what is represented is divided in diegesis and themes (cf. Martinez and Scheffel 1999: 20–26; 134). Diegesis, theme, and mode of representation correspond with the character-specific division into fictional beings, symbols, and artefacts; the aspect of symptoms is missing.

76 As for the functions of character related textual information, Jannidis distinguishes between final, causal, reader-oriented, and compositional motivation (2004: 221–29); Bordwell distinguishes between compositional, realistic, inter-textual, and aesthetic motivation (1985: 36ff.).

77 Künne explicates intra-fictional, trans-fictional, inter-fictional, and status-related statements (1983: 295–96). Intra-fictional statements concern the fictional being, trans- and inter-fictional statements are two forms of symptom statements. Status-related assertions belong to the artefact level but do not cover it completely. For alternative explications, see Currie 1990.

78 Panofsky lists three layers of meaning of the work of art: the primary or natural *sujet* (character as represented being), the secondary or conventional *sujet* as the subject of iconography (character as symbol), and the proper meaning as the object of iconology (character as symptom) (cf. Panofsky 1972; Büttner and Gott dang 2006: 20ff.). According to Bordwell, four kinds of meaning are involved in understanding film (1989: 8f.). On the level of referential meaning, spectators construct the represented world (including the represented beings). On the level of explicit and implicit meaning, they work out the general messages (e.g., through understanding characters as symbols). On the level of symptomatic meaning, they grasp the involuntary expression of the producers (e.g., through characters as symptoms). However, the symptom aspect of characters as understood in this book goes beyond Bordwell's concept of symptomatic meaning because it is supposed to comprise any actual causes and effects of characters (see also Chapter 12 of this book). Artefact properties of characters do not appear in Bordwell's model of meaning, but they correspond to his concepts of 'film form' as the 'overall system of relations that we can perceive among the elements in the whole film' and the 'stylistic system' as 'patterned and significant use of techniques' (ibid.: 2001: 40, 155).

Statements about characters as artefacts are more complex; they have a double structural correspondence in reception. On the one hand, they are linked to basal perception (the lowest level of the reception model). However, perceptual experiences of shapes, colours and sounds are often preconscious, fleeting and correspondingly difficult to verbalise. They can often not be described directly in the analysis, but only with recourse to the means of representation and the text structures that evoke them. For example, by saying that the camera shows Rick in close-up, we might want to refer to the experience of spatial closeness that this type of shot evokes. However, this indirect way of describing perceptual experience implies an aesthetic reflection on the relationship that exists between the viewer's experience of the character and the shape of the audiovisual text. For example, the statement 'Rick is often shown in close-ups' presupposes, among other things, that the mental model of Rick is linked not only to perceptions and memories of film images, but also to ideas about their production in camerawork. Such forms of aesthetic reflection could be assigned to the fourth level of the reception model, the reflection on communicative contexts. In view of their close connection to aesthetic experience, however, it seems more sensible to consider them as a separate aspect. In short, statements about the aesthetics of characters and their design as artefacts correspond to two levels of reception, basic perception and aesthetic reflection. This is in line with a widespread understanding of aesthetics, which also links sensory experience and reflection.

In summary it may be stated that the subject area of character analysis can be structured in two ways (Table 5). Firstly, we make statements about characters as represented beings, symbols, symptoms, and artefacts, which each imply particular reception processes. Secondly, we formulate theses about different forms of character reception and elaboration: the empirical reception by different spectators in the past, present, and future; the reception intended by the filmmakers; and the ideal reception according to communicative goals and norms.

	Perception	Model formation	Exploration of meaning	Exploration of context	Aesthetic reflection
Statements on characters	Character as artefact 1	Character as represented being	Character as symbol	Character as symptom	Character as artefact 2
Empirical reception	Empirical perception	Empirical character model	Empirical inferences about meanings	Empirical inferences about contexts	Empirical reflection of representation

Intended reception	Intended perception	Intended character model	Intended inferences about meanings	Intended inferences about contexts	Intended reflection of representation
Ideal reception	Ideal perception	Ideal character model	Ideal inferences about meanings	Ideal inferences about contexts	Ideal reflection of representation
Elaboration after reception	---	↓ Elaboration of character model	↓ Elaboration of meaning	↓ Elaboration of context	↓ Elaboration of aesthetic reflection

Table 5 The field of character analysis, its objects of investigation, and the relations between statements about characters and about reception

The preceding explanation of basic principles and structures in character analysis may seem too abstract and pedantic. However, it is necessary because its results go against many widely held theories of character and can highlight their problems and blind spots. In Chapter 4, a simplified model of analysis which should be easier to understand and apply is developed on its basis and illustrated with examples. In the following chapters, this general model is concretised. They develop specific concepts for the analysis of characters as represented beings, artefacts, symbols, and symptoms and finally bring them together into a comprehensive system. In doing so, they attempt to integrate preliminary work from hermeneutic, psychoanalytic, semiotic, and cognitive theories as well as practical manuals. These different approaches must be evaluated comparatively in order to make the complexity of the characters understandable. In attempting to integrate their findings, I follow certain rules. Internal consistency and plausibility have top priority. Cognitive-perceptual theory (in conjunction with phenomenology) forms the basis and the central approach; concepts from other approaches will be modified and adapted. When necessary, I will weaken strong theses and interpret specific concepts more openly. Concepts that seem consensual will be tacitly integrated, while problematic cases or choices between alternatives will be explained in more detail. Ultimately, however, my proposal for a comprehensive model of character analysis will have to stand on its own and convince by its usefulness.

PART II: HOW TO ANALYSE CHARACTERS



Fig. 2 Analysing the characters Maria, Bill, and Hermann in *The Marriage of Maria Braun* raises many difficult questions. (Dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, 1978, Albatros Produktion/Westdeutscher Rundfunk/Trio Film, Germany. All rights reserved.)

Part II

After clarifying the theoretical foundations of the definition, ontology, constitution, and reception of characters, Part II of the book proposes a general heuristic model for analysing them: the Character Clock. The more specific sub-areas of this model are differentiated step by step in the following parts of the book; they develop conceptual tools for analysing more specific aspects of characters. The last part of the book will provide an overview of these analytical tools and demonstrates how they can be applied using an example.

The aim of this book is to lay down the foundations for a comprehensive analysis of characters in film and other media. The preceding chapters have clarified the most basic theoretical prerequisites: what characters are, how they are created,

comprehended, and experienced. In this chapter, the results will now be condensed into a workable model for analysis. To make it easier to remember, I call it—with wilful naivety—the ‘Character Clock’. This general model will serve as a heuristic for a first assessment of characters and as a starting point for more precise investigation. As it is of crucial importance to the whole enterprise, it must be substantiated carefully. The arguments presented up to now will therefore be briefly summarised again in the next few paragraphs, also to accommodate those readers who have skipped the previous theory chapters.

The production, interpretation, and criticism of media texts continually raises the question how one can systematically investigate fascinating, enigmatic, influential, or questionable characters and make the results understandable and convincing for others. Intuition is certainly indispensable, but not sufficient to give a comprehensive picture, discover new aspects, discuss controversial positions, or re-examine one’s own ideas. We also need clear concepts and procedures that capture the essential structures of our object of study and provide orientation. Traditional approaches to characters have yielded important insights, but failed to produce a model for analysis that meets these demands. The goal is, therefore, to develop such a model by supplementing available research and integrating it into a comprehensive approach.

This presupposes an understanding of what characters are, how they are created, and how they are experienced. The examination of a variety of definitions has shown that characters can be understood as recognisable represented beings endowed with an inner life; their spectrum includes not only humans but also animals and all kinds of fantastic creatures. The critical scrutiny of the ontological status of fictional beings (and more generally, of represented beings) has shown that characters are neither signs nor mental representations, neither descriptions in the text nor ideas in the mind. Instead, they are collective constructs created through communication, e.g., through the production and reception of films. Characters arise through communicative games: filmmakers create worlds with particular inhabitants and depict them in a way that induces essentially intersubjective imaginations in their viewers. The character conceptions of both producers and recipients rest on partly shared bodily and mental dispositions, including real-world knowledge about persons and other real beings, as well as specific knowledge of media and narratives, such as schemata about character types, genres, and communicative rules.

This means, amongst other things, that characters are not directly given for analysis. Their apparent self-evidence is deceptive. What we see on the screen are only semiotic character representations, not the characters themselves. We scan the audiovisual information and develop mental character representations by perceiving forms and sounds, inferring psychological properties and social relations, activating expectations and recollections. However, our subjective, transitory, and variable character conceptions are not the intersubjective, permanent characters themselves. Different viewers register and experience characters in different ways. To establish which of

their mental models are 'right' and essential for the constitution of an intersubjective character, we need to assess the communicative rules, motives, and capabilities of producers and recipients. The answer to the question, for instance, whether Rick Blaine is 'really' Oedipally driven not only depends on the information supplied by the film, on the intentions of the filmmakers, or the ideas of particular viewers, but also on the rules of the communication game that they are all involved in.

This conception of characters as communicative constructs or social artefacts clearly implies that the analysis cannot be restricted to individual characters, but must include the entire range of phenomena in communication and reception connected with them. The fundamental goal of communication—both for the viewers and the filmmakers—is reception. Whoever visits the cinema wants to see, hear, feel, think, sink into a world and experience its qualities. Whoever makes films wants to create such experiences. We experience characters in multi-layered cognitive and affective processes ranging from the perception of character representations through the formation of character models to inferences about indirect meanings and references to realities. Since communicative actions and texts are functionally geared towards reception, the properties of characters can only be established by investigating modes of reception.

Reception, however, refers not only to the ways in which characters are actually understood and experienced by concrete viewers in the past, present, or future (empirical reception). There is, secondly, also the anticipated experience of characters according to the intentions of the filmmakers (intended reception). And thirdly, there is the kind of reception that would optimally use and integrate film information according to a balanced coordination between communication rules, author intentions, and viewer interests (ideal reception). A simplified example: an auteur wants the protagonist of his film to appear charismatic (intended reception). However, his filmic portrayal of the character makes many viewers see the latter as rather creepy (empirical reception). A historical or empirical analysis could reconstruct both these phenomena. After careful consideration, however, one could also come to the conclusion that it would be best to understand the protagonist as being neither charismatic nor creepy but rather ambivalent, because this would correspond to applicable communicative rules for this type of film and allow for a more interesting film experience, and would still be largely compatible with the intentions of the filmmaker and the dispositions of his target audience—in short, because it would best meet the criteria of successful communication (ideal reception). The first two forms of analysis are descriptive, the third form rests on normative presumptions. The different forms of character reception obviously entail different goals of analysis. Filmmakers, film historians, or cultural theorists are primarily interested in the empirical reception of specific groups of viewers, target groups, historical audiences, or particular social milieus. Film critics or students of film interpretation focus more on the processes of intended or ideal reception or seek to expand their results to find more general meanings (elaboration). Each of these research goals requires different data and procedures. Because of that,

neither psychology nor phenomenology or sociology suffice as a basis for analysing character reception.

The following chapters will show that the essential categories and procedures of character analysis may be derived from reception. The reasons are relatively straightforward. Firstly, our analysis produces statements not only about characters but also about different forms of character reception. And secondly, any statements about characters ultimately presuppose statements about reception. These interrelationships become clearer as soon as the presuppositions of the analysis are made transparent. During the process of watching a film (the process of representational communication), most reception processes take place in a spontaneous, unreflected, and non-linguistic way and tend to be easily forgotten. However, as soon as one starts to talk about the film and its characters (meta-representational communication), one refers to a conscious reconstruction and verbalisation of its reception and its results. Character analysis is thus fundamentally nothing but a systematic reconstruction and elaboration of different forms of reception on the basis of maximally exact observations and data. Customarily, however, one does not (explicitly) speak about reception, but about characters, since this simplifies things considerably.

4. A Basic Model for Analysis: The Character Clock

4.1 Characters as Represented Beings, Symbols, Symptoms, and Artefacts—and Their Reception

Our preliminary considerations disprove three assumptions about characters that are widely considered as self-evident. First of all, characters are not immediately given and directly accessible. Instead, they are products of processes of communicative construction and negotiation. Secondly, the analysis of characters is by no means restricted to the characters themselves, but also includes the various processes and products of the empirical, intended, or ideal reception of characters. Thirdly, the analysis of characters is not a uniform activity, but involves different forms and goals, which require different data and procedures. Any analysis must take these results into consideration. Statements about characters are frequently ambiguous or rest on problematical presumptions. Therefore, it is often necessary to reconstruct the reception of a character in order to be able to make an opinion about the character understandable for others. People who claim, for example, that ‘Rick is sentimental’ should be able to make that claim more precise if it is questioned. Does it mean that viewers have actually formed such an idea relating to Rick? That it was intended by the filmmakers? Or that it is the result of a process of successful communication or elaboration?

A theoretical model of character analysis must adequately cover this interrelationship among characters, communication, and reception, and should also use it as a basis to integrate and expand on the results of research. It must be as complete, differentiated, and consistent as it can be but still remain as concise, flexible, and easy to use as possible. These requirements can be met by combining the fundamental structures and categories of character analysis to form a simple core model that can be further differentiated whenever necessary by means of more specific concepts.

The search for these pervasive fundamental structures of character analysis may benefit considerably by looking at three particular areas: the ways in which people talk about characters in everyday life; relevant theories in philosophy and the study of film, literature, and the arts; and the psychological modelling of character reception. A

comparison of these areas makes clear that they show striking correspondences that are anything but coincidental. A basic model of analysis may be derived from these correspondences, and it can be further supported by arguments supplied by the analysis of language, theories of reception, and meta-theoretical considerations (see Chapter 3).

Looking first at everyday conversation about characters, we may be struck by the sheer diversity of the properties and relationships that we ascribe to them. Various theories in philosophy and media studies use semantic criteria to arrange the multiplicity of such utterances into meaningful and manageable categories by referring to the logical structure of the utterances or by distinguishing between different levels of meaning in media products. That these theories about experiencing characters and talking about them correspond to a high degree suggests that characters exhibit specific properties and structures in four respects: as represented (fictional) beings, as symbols, as symptoms, and as artefacts. One might thus say about Rick Blaine, for instance, that he has dark hair and is in love with Ilsa Lund (represented being), that he stands for the United States in the Second World War (symbol), that he was a role model for many viewers (symptom), and that he is presented through audiovisual and narrative means as an idealised, but nevertheless multidimensional character (artefact).

An alternative analysis is offered by the psychology of character reception and experience. Typically, reception passes through several levels involving specific cognitive and affective processes: perception, mental model formation, exploration of indirect meanings, inferences about communicative contexts and reflections about aesthetic form (Diagram 3). These processes interact bottom-up and top-down.

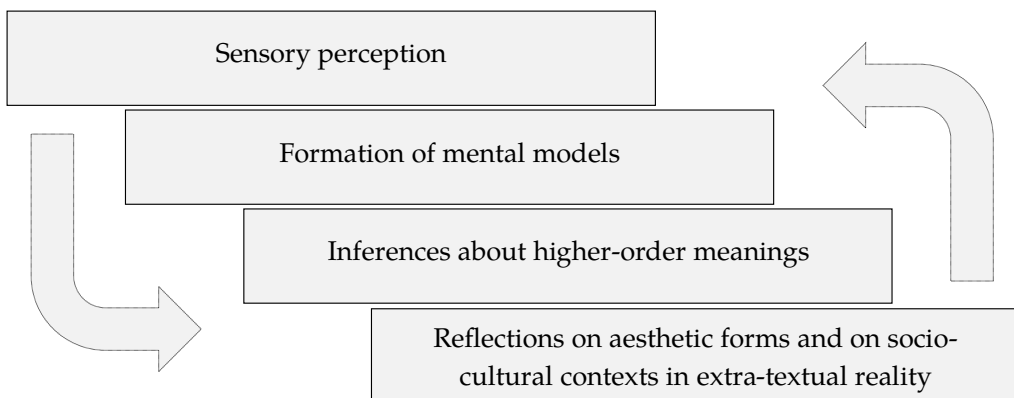


Diagram 3 Levels of character reception and their interaction (simplified)

Comparing the semantic clustering of statements about characters with the psychological classification of the essential processes of character reception immediately makes clear that the two overlap considerably and that bringing them together promises to be very productive. The points briefly described in the following survey will be subjected to deeper analysis in later chapters.

1. Basic perception: a gap in character semantics. Character reception in film always starts with the sensory perception of audiovisual information, i.e., of the sounds and moving images of the film representing a character (this could be modified for other media: written text in literature, image sequences in comics, moving bodies and spoken language in theatre). Large parts of these character representations are sub- or preconsciously perceived and processed. Thus, perceptual impressions and affects are created even before a represented being is recognised. This sensory, perceptual, and affective base underpins the further, higher, levels of reception. Even before we, for example, begin to understand Rick Blaine's physical and psychological traits, we perceive forms, sounds, and rhythms in how he is represented. The brilliant white of Rick's jacket attracts the viewers' attention; dark grey shades and minor-key sounds convey a melancholy atmosphere. When we talk about characters in our analysis, there seems to be nothing that corresponds directly with this level of perception. And the semantics of statements about characters cannot include it as a sphere in its own right because these statements necessarily deal with characters that have already been identified. Furthermore, sensations, perceptions, and core affects are transitory and often difficult to verbalise. So here we have a meaningful split between character reception and character semantics: when talking about characters, the level of immediate perception can only be expressed indirectly, and this entails a process of aesthetic reflection (see no. 5 of this list and further details in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8).¹
2. Mental model formation: characters as represented beings. The core of character reception is the development of a mental character model (described in more detail in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6). The interplay of memory and perceived information creates imaginative ideas of a gestalt with specific physical, mental, and social features. We construct the mental model of a represented being, for instance, a model of Rick. This character model will develop continuously in the course of reception, it will be embedded in diverse situation models—Rick interacts with his environment—and initiate processes of cognitive and affective involvement. A provisional model is usually in place only split seconds after the first perception; it then alters with time, is changed and refined. Rick, for example, is first introduced through dialogues. It takes a while before we see him in his role as the sovereign café owner. Further traits of his personality become apparent through his relationship with Ilsa, and by

¹ This applies even if parts of the perception may be semantically or cognitively penetrated (i.e., informed and guided by previous knowledge).

the end of the film, both his personality and our character model have developed in many ways. This level of reception is associated with aspects of characters that can be called mimetic, diegetic, representational, or fictional: with assumptions and statements as to what kind of represented being a character is, and what properties and relations it has as the inhabitant of an imaginary world. Among these properties are the character's physical, mental, and social features, its behaviours, experiences, spatial and temporal relationships, its connections with other characters and objects, with concrete events and abstract rules of the storyworld: Rick is dark-haired, intelligent, loves Ilsa, breaks rules, and so on.

3. Association of higher-level meanings: characters as symbols. Character reception is usually not restricted to the formation of mental character models because these models trigger associations, processes of abstraction, and progressive inferences about indirect or superordinate meanings, which are all mentally represented and connected with the character model (see Chapter 11). We can understand characters as complex signs that refer to things beyond the represented world, for instance to properties, problems, or thematic statements that we represent in the form of general concepts, thoughts, or 'macro-propositions' (van Dijk 1985). We may assume, for example, that Rick stands for the US or conveys the message that moral integrity is more important than love. This symbolic, metaphorical, or thematic level of character reception is associated with statements as to what a character stands for as a 'symbol'—as the bearer of indirect or higher-level meanings of whatever kind. Interpretations of films or novels often ascribe such meanings to characters, consider characters to be topic-bearers, personifications, allegories, exemplifications, or metaphors.
4. Inferences about communicative contexts and extratextual reality: characters as symptoms. We can reflect on each of these reception levels and draw conclusions about their connections with communicative realities: with production and reception as they are mentally represented in the form of 'context models' of discourse (see Chapter 12). The communicative causes and effects of characters become the objects of hypotheses entertained by viewers. Why have the creators designed the character in this way? And how might the character affect other viewers? As regards the production side, one may ask what motives and reasons might have led to the creation of a particular character, for instance, whether Rick's development could be related to the anti-fascist attitudes of the filmmakers. As regards reception, one may ask what effects the character might have, for example, how Rick might influence US audiences.

In addition, we connect characters with more general sociocultural contexts. What notions of masculinity influenced the formation of Rick's personality? This pragmatic, reality or context-related aspect of reception is associated with statements about characters as symptoms in the sense of causal and sociocultural phenomena, as indicators of extratextual reality or as influences on that reality. Characters are ascribed relations with various elements of the communication process, with their creators, audiences, cultural contexts, and social influences.

5. Aesthetic reflection: characters as artefacts. The exploration of communicative relations is closely connected with specifically text-related processes of aesthetic reflection.² During the reception process we repeatedly make connections between a character and the audiovisual text (or in the case of other media, linguistic, visual, aural, or haptic texts). We contemplate the particular structures and forms of textual presentation as means of creating and shaping characters and evaluate their use. Style of acting and language, mise-en-scene, camera work, editing, narrative structures, or dramaturgical functions not only affect us subconsciously on this level, as on the level of basic perception, but we can recognise them consciously in their functions and effects and correlate them with the character model. Viewers can thus ponder the choice of the actor for Rick's part or his style of dialogue and evaluate it aesthetically. Such reception processes constitute the foundation of aesthetic, text-related, or stylistic statements about characters as artefacts, that is, about how characters are designed and presented and what aesthetic structures they exhibit (see Chapter 7 and Chapter 8). Such statements about the aesthetic forms of characters and their relations to a media text are often of particular importance for the analysis. Frequently they bring together particular formal features of characters under generalised concepts that apply to artefact properties or narrative functions: 'Rick is a multidimensional, idealised character'; or, 'Rick, as the protagonist, drives the action forward'. Beyond such generalisations, aesthetic reflection also permits paraphrases of the otherwise barely accessible basic perceptual experiences on the first level. Expressions like 'The camera tracks in on Rick' or 'Rick's face nearly fills the left half of the screen', for example, evoke visual experiences, perceptions of forms and sizes, and simultaneously explain them by indicating their production processes.

2 In the first description of the reception model (Chapter 3), aesthetic reflection was placed on the level of the inferences about communicative contexts. However, since statements about the formal aspects of characters and their relationships with textual structures occupy such an important position in the analysis, it seems sensible to grant them their own focus.

The search for basic structures of character analysis consequently leads to a multiply grounded division into five structural areas. We experience characters on five levels of reception, which are characterised by specific sensory, cognitive, and affective processes: the perception of character representations, the formation of character models, the inference of higher meanings, the exploration of communicative contexts, and aesthetic reflection. These levels form a hierarchy, with the first two being indispensable prerequisites for any character reception, and the further levels usually but not always involved. Sometimes perception and model formation are considered to be self-evident acts of the comprehension of characters, and the other levels are seen as components of more demanding processes of interpretation.³ This is a problematical distinction, however, because even the formation of character models, in particular the exploration of the inner life, is often no less controversial than 'higher' processes are (see Chapter 6 and Part VI). The distinction between the levels of reception is based on an ideal-typical simplification. The levels of reception are interdependent and intertwined through the temporal interaction of their cognitive and affective processes (both bottom-up and top-down). Episodes of character reception may develop in the order described, but in the course of the film, overlaps, jumps, and feedback loops occur. Then the upper reception levels may also affect the lower ones: for instance, viewers who develop the idea at the beginning of the film that Rick stands for the US might consequently, in their acts of perceiving and model formation, direct their attention predominantly to bodily, mental, and social features that confirm their assumption.

In the analysis we can reconstruct different modes of character reception: the empirical reception in the past, present, and future, the intended reception, and the ideal reception. In each case we may deal with perception, model formation, exploration of meanings and contexts, and aesthetic reflection. During or after reception, we can further investigate and elaborate the character model and its associated meanings, contexts, and textual structures. To support our assertions, we can use various kinds of information beyond the film text, such as information about viewers, filmmakers, and relevant conventions of film communication. The most precise analytical procedure would be to reconstruct all the phenomena of reception and their preconditions in detail. Such an approach, however, would obviously be extremely complex and in most cases needlessly laborious. Talking of characters is, by contrast, a justifiable simplification: characters and their properties can be conceived of as products of successful reception and elaboration. In speaking of characters, one implicitly presupposes that fundamental parts of perception and mental model formation function smoothly. The assumption is that in general, reception processes are intersubjectively similar, at least to the extent that all competent viewers construct

3 Bordwell (1989: 8ff.) sometimes seems to suggest that. However, in some passages of his book Bordwell also stresses that *comprehension* is a complex process that involves elements of what others would call *interpretation*.

the mental model of a represented being with particular properties, such as similar Rick Blaine-models, and that they thus identify the same represented being. These core features of ideal character models form the implicit precondition of all talk about characters. The simplification is then that fundamental processes of perception and model formation can be taken for granted. Despite this, however, the multiplicity of statement forms remains enormous. When talking about characters, we may regard them from a diegetic, a thematic, a communicative, and an aesthetic (and sensory) point of view. Each one of these domains splits into a rich variety of properties, relations and objects of reference. Furthermore, all the statements are interwoven, and all characters can be described differently when they change ('Rick abandons his cynical attitude after Ilsa's confession of her love', 'Rick is first only presented linguistically, and only later visually', 'Today, Rick has lost his previous function of a role model').

This classification of aspects is (despite the somewhat unwieldy terminology) not an esoteric construct and not solely suitable for the interpretation of the protagonists of complex works of art. One often comes across these different aspects of characters in everyday conversations or popular film journalism. The German journal *Cinema*, for example, initially describes the eponymous hero of Peter Jackson's *King Kong* as a giant wild ape that captures a woman and learns to love her (represented being). Beyond that, the ape is understood to be a symbol: 'There are several interpretations of what the savage Kong stands for: the male that is reduced to his archaic drives, the dread of an anarchistic revolution, certainly also the racist fear of the oppressed black man' (*Cinema* 2006: 28; translated). There is also the suggestion of a close connection with sociocultural contexts, and further context-relations of the character as a symptom are voiced directly, such as inter-textual ones: 'There have been the most diverse successors to the giant shaggy ape in the course of film history [...]. The crankiest offshoot to date, however, remains the trash punch-up *King Kong vs. Godzilla*' (ibid.: 36). There is extensive comment on the means and techniques used to create the character as an artefact:

[Andrew Serkis functions] as the human digital model of the giant shaggy ape. Like the completely computer-animated Gollum in the 'Lord of the Rings' saga, Serkis again acted the sequences of movements in tight spandex suits in front of an infrared camera before they were transformed by computer to create the fictional character. (ibid.: 31)

As one can see here, the different aspects of characters are usually not dealt with separately in the analysis but linked together and interwoven. A single statement may change its perspective several times: 'And when the raging creature from the past tumbles from the top of the Empire State Building—the symbol of the Western society of progress—then the former monster has long changed into a tortured animal that touches the hearts of the viewers' (ibid.: 34f.). Initially, this statement deals with the represented being ('raging creature'), then jumps to its symbolic status (King Kong as a symbol of primeval nature is confronted with the 'symbol of the Western society of progress'), jumps back again to the represented being ('tortured animal') and finally

to the effects of the character as a symptom ('that touches the hearts of the viewers').

Such interlinking of analytical statements are often intended to serve explanations and justifications. Certain patterns of argumentation about characters seem particularly widespread. Often claims concerning the long-term effects of characters are justified by reference to their reception while watching the film, the reactions during reception in turn by reference to the features of the represented being, and these features, finally, by reference to forms of (re)presentation in the media text. One might, for example, claim that viewers imitate Rick Blaine because they identify with him (symptom), that this identification is due to Rick's attractive appearance and personality (represented being), and that these traits are emphasised in the film by certain audiovisual and narrative forms (artefact).

Each one of these aspects of characters is undoubtedly very complex in itself; satisfactory analysis is, however, crucially dependent on reduction of complexity. It appears sensible, therefore, to develop as concise a core model of character analysis as possible, a heuristic that can be differentiated further when required. The results so far can be brought together in the following model, which I have called the Character Clock. The somewhat naive name and the simple graphical form of the model should make it easier to remember and apply. The previous chapters have hopefully shown that, despite its apparent simplicity, it is based on a very solid foundation.

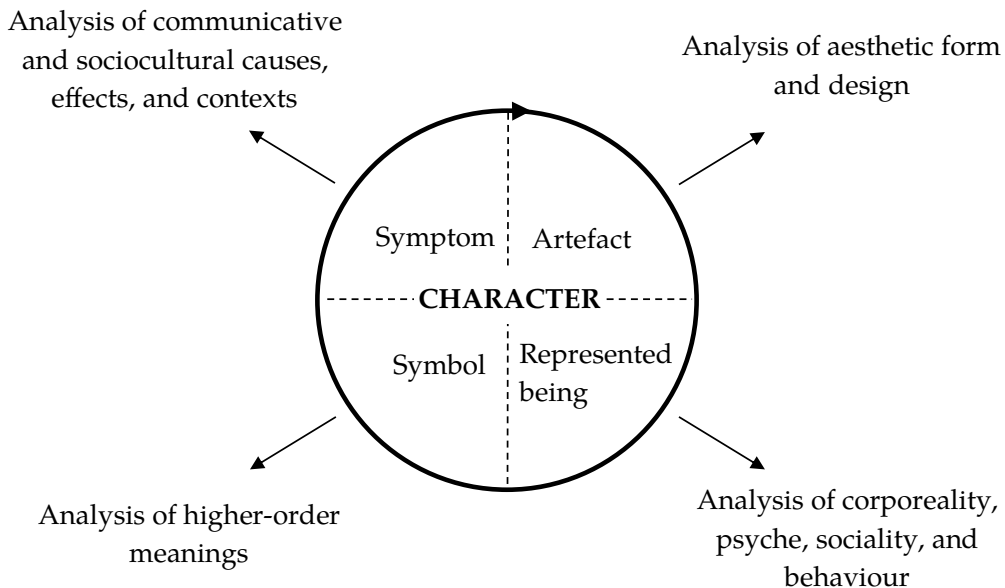


Diagram 4 The basic heuristic and analytical model of the Character Clock

This basic model of the Character Clock is suitable for various forms of analysis of characters themselves and the processes or results of their reception. The diagram can be interpreted in a static and in a dynamic way. As a static figure it shows that characters can be analysed with regard to four general aspects: as artefacts, as represented

beings, as symbols, and as symptoms. Read clockwise, it associates these aspects of a character with dynamic reception processes that are, as a rule, hierarchically arranged in temporal succession (as indicated by the arrow).

1. Before viewers recognise a character, they perceive its audiovisual representations in a mostly non-representational manner. This basic, mostly pre-conscious level of perception is captured by the model under *artefact* because its description can be based on the means of presentation that trigger the perceptual impressions.
2. The viewers construct mental models of the characters on the basis of their perceptions. They develop conceptions of a character with distinctive properties in a specific world. On this level, characters are examined as represented beings.
3. Once the viewers have grasped the properties of the represented being, they can understand it as a sign that refers to something beyond the storyworld and helps to convey indirect meanings, superordinate themes, or general messages. On this level, characters are examined as symbols.
4. Reception results at this level can suggest possible causes and effects of a character in reality, especially contexts or elements of its communicative production and reception, such as a low budget, social stereotypes, political intentions of the producers, or moral effects on certain audiences. At this level, the characters are examined as symptoms.
5. Finally, the viewers can reflect on the formal, aesthetic features of character design at each of the preceding levels. On this level, characters are examined as artefacts.

In a reception-related reading of the diagram, the artefact area is thus 'doubly occupied', with the perception level from which the circular movement of the clock starts and with the level of aesthetic reflection where it ends. The circular form of the model shows, furthermore, that reception is not a finished process, but one that keeps repeating itself during the viewing of the film. The processing of the first character-related information (e.g., a title sequence) is followed by further information and further processing leading to new impressions, ideas, and inferences about the character. The fact that the four areas of the model meet in the middle and along the broken lines is intended to suggest that the course of reception, from perception to aesthetic reflection, is only an ideal-type tendency because all aspects of a character and its reception may interact with each other. Assumptions about thematic meanings or communicative contexts of a character may, for example, govern the perception and construction of character models. The character's aspects are therefore not only connected through the anchoring of the upper reception levels in the lower ones but also through various kinds of interaction between the levels. Functional interconnections, reinforcements,

or contrasts may arise and lead to something new. When analysing characters, it is therefore possible to focus on a particular level or aspect, but its connections to the others should also be considered.

The Character Clock must thus not be understood as a rigid schema but rather as a flexible heuristic that can be adapted to the research goals of a particular analysis. The arrangement of the concepts within the model merely suggests an orientation that need not be strictly followed. Nor does the equal division into quarters mean that the four categories are always equally important. Its relevance varies depending on the character in question and the goal of its analysis. The fundamental question of an analysis is: What aspects of a character are of special relevance, and what aspects are controversial? The interrelationship of the different aspects may then often be best explored through a sort of pendular movement or a circular hermeneutical procedure.

There are various reasons why the Character Clock is a useful heuristic foundation for the analysis of characters. Its simple basic structure makes the model easy to learn and to apply. It may easily be further differentiated and thus provide opportunities for integrating concepts from different theories. The correspondence of basic concepts may help to create valuable discoveries and additions and enable the interlinking of structure-related and reception-related approaches. The distinction of four reception-based aspects of characters shows a way out of the decade-long dispute about whether characters must be treated as imaginary persons (represented beings) or as textual signs (artefacts): they are both, and they can furthermore be investigated as symbols and as symptoms. The Character Clock can therefore prevent critics and researchers from overlooking and neglecting fundamental aspects of characters in their analyses.

4.2 General Kinds of Characters

The simple core model already makes it easier to recognise and compare the essential features and basic structures of characters. As a rule, each work foregrounds certain dimensions of its characters that attract particular attention and interest when being received and analysed. In this respect, a broad distinction can be made between mimetic, symbolic, symptomatic, and artificial kinds of characters.

The standard case is represented by mimetic (or diegetic) characters. The analysis of classic mainstream films like *Casablanca* generally focuses its attention—withstanding the stars—on characters as represented beings, on their appearance and their actions, their personalities and mental processes. The reception concentrates on the level of mental model formation. The means of representation are not intended to invite aesthetic reflection and are consequently employed in an unobtrusive, ‘illusionist’ manner (e.g., ‘invisible cuts’). Inferences about indirect meanings or real contexts are rare, they are either preconscious associations or happen only after the reception. In brief: characters should be primarily viewed as represented beings, and their other aspects are relegated to the background. This standard case dominates not

only the practice of production but also many theories.

However, characters can be devised in quite different ways. We may speak of 'artificial characters', for example, if their artefact dimension is foregrounded and they are only schematically portrayed as represented beings. Artificial characters appear mainly in more experimental or shorter audiovisual forms such as the music video by Antoine Bardou-Jacquet for Alex Gopher's electronic track 'The Child' (1999, sampling from Billie Holliday's song 'God Bless the Child') (Figure 3). The animated short shows the story of a New York couple that is expecting the birth of its child. A taxi driver rushes the couple to the hospital; they are stopped by police officers at first, but finally escorted by them to their destination. There is nothing special about the action or the represented beings in this video; they are extremely stereotypical. Its extraordinary feature is that its entire fictional world is literally composed of computer-animated words.⁴ In this typographical world, the written words themselves embody the objects to which they refer in three-dimensional form. Cars, for example, are formed by the word 'car'. The same principle holds for the characters whose simplified human shapes are formed by a vertical row of defining nouns and adjectives, the woman, for instance, by 'brown hair / pretty face / woman / pregnant / red dress / sneakers'. As represented beings, the characters thus exhibit only very few and typified features. The themes or contextual relations are not particularly interesting, either. The main thing is the uncommon manner of presentation of the characters as artefacts.

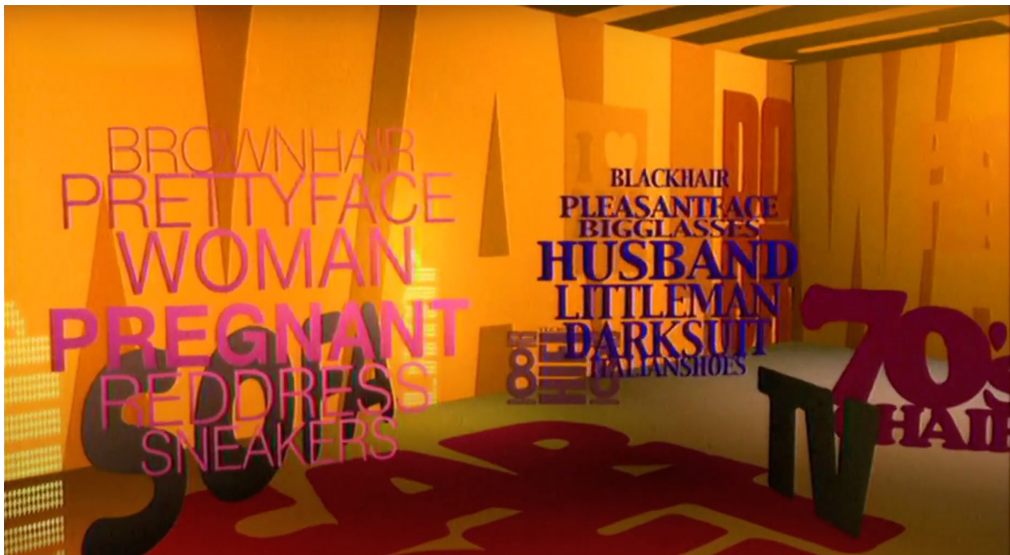


Fig. 3 The artificial characters Woman and Man from Bardou-Jacquet's music video to Alex Gopher's track 'The Child'. (Dir. Antoine Bardou-Jacquet, Alex Gopher: 'The Child' (Music Video), 1999, Le Village, France. All rights reserved.)

4 The sounds, other than music, closely relate to ordinary realities, but are restricted to a minimum.

For the third group, the symbolic characters, the meanings they convey are of particular importance. In Fritz Lang's *Der müde Tod* (*Destiny*, Germany 1921), a man dressed in a black robe threatens the heroine and other characters (Figure 4). What is significant here is not so much the represented being 'Death', its clothing style or supernatural features, but the fact that it is an allegorical character personifying human dying and prompting particular thoughts about it. The characteristics of the represented being primarily serve these thematic functions, and the means of presentation help to underscore them and to intensify the symbolism by giving it a perceptible form.



Fig. 4 Personified Death (Bernhard Goetzke) and The Wife (Lil Dagover) as symbolic characters in Fritz Lang's *Destiny*. (Dir. Fritz Lang, *Destiny*, 1921, Decla-Bioscop, Germany. All rights reserved.)

There are various forms of symptomatic characters, whose causal relations to extratextual reality are foregrounded in analysis. Although the level of the represented being is frequently of relevance here, it is also connected with equally important references to real beings. This applies, for example, to characters in biopics or romans à clef, or cameo appearances of well-known actors. Context relations of a different kind characterise many protagonists of auteur films. Here the viewers are required to make use of their knowledge about the filmmakers when dealing critically with their film characters. Some characters provoke a symptomatic analysis even if it is not intended by the producers, for instance because they are conspicuously racist or sexist. Propaganda films and similar politically or morally controversial films focus the attention on the question of their impact on viewers and the producers' intentions. The analysis of Veit Harlan's antisemitic propaganda film *Jud Süß* and its protagonist cannot be separated from the film's role in connection with the Holocaust (see Figure 42).



Fig. 5 Central to the analysis of the characters Charlie Kaufmann (Nicolas Cage) and Susan Orlean (Meryl Streep) in *Adaptation* are their references to eponymous real people: the screenwriter of the film and the author of the adapted book. However, the characters' dimensions as artefacts and symbols are also quite pronounced in this film. (Dir. Spike Jonze, *Adaptation*, 2002, Columbia Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.)

Many characters do not show a clear dominance of one of the four dimensions. Usually, the aspects appear in different combinations and changing emphasis. The satirical, self-reflective drama *Adaptation*, for example, is characterised by a complex hybrid form, with the characters showing distinct biographical, authorial, intertextual, and contextual references (Figure 5). The story of the film is that arthouse screenwriter Charlie Kaufmann (Nicolas Cage) is in danger of failing in his attempt to adapt a subtle book by author Susan Orlean (Meryl Streep) into a screenplay, but is then rescued by his twin brother Donald (also Cage), who has just learned to write silly scripts according to the usual formula. Quite obviously, some of the main characters refer to real people. The actual Charlie Kaufmann is the author of the script for *Adaptation*, and Orlean and her book also exist (Donald, on the other hand, does not). Alongside this symptomatic level of the characters, their artefactual level takes on equal importance, as their mode of representation gradually shifts from the conventions of arthouse to those of mainstream cinema, in this way subtly criticising both forms. At first, Charlie and Donald Kaufman act like characters of an arthouse film; then they increasingly take on traits of typical protagonists of mainstream action movies. At the same time, both are symbols for fundamentally different ways of creating art, seeing the world and living in and with it.

The Character Clock thus shows that the focus of analysis may be aimed at each of the different dimensions of represented being, artefact, symbol, or symptom. There are diegetic, artificial, symbolic, or symptomatic characters, as well as many mixed forms. Special emphasis may be placed on specific partial structures of the four aspects, e.g., on psychological differentiation, metaphorical substance, narrative function, intertextual

references, or long-term effects of a character. The model allows for comparison of characters on this fundamental level and thus can help identify essential features and trends of character conception in certain cultures, periods, or forms of film production. In postmodern films or animation, the artefact aspect of characters often predominates, in art cinema it often tends to be their symbolic aspect, in cult and propaganda films their symptomatic aspect.

4.3 Expanding the Model: Contexts and Affects

The Character Clock is also a useful starting point for considerations that go beyond the individual character and their characteristics. Firstly, this concerns the relationships between characters and their contexts. The model shows that they are always embedded in at least four different kinds of contexts. As artefacts, characters and their audiovisual, linguistic, or other representations are parts of the overall aesthetic system of a work of art, its form or style. As represented beings, characters inhabit a storyworld, where they form social constellations and are involved in situations, actions, and events. The higher meanings that characters convey as symbols are part of a work's broader framework of meaning and the totality of its themes and messages. Finally, of course, characters also never stand alone as symptoms, but interact with sociocultural and communicative contexts in reality that include many other causal factors and effects. From the perspective of production, characters are not only embedded in such contexts of form, world, action, meaning, and reality, but also fulfil certain aesthetic, narrative, signifying, and causal functions within them.

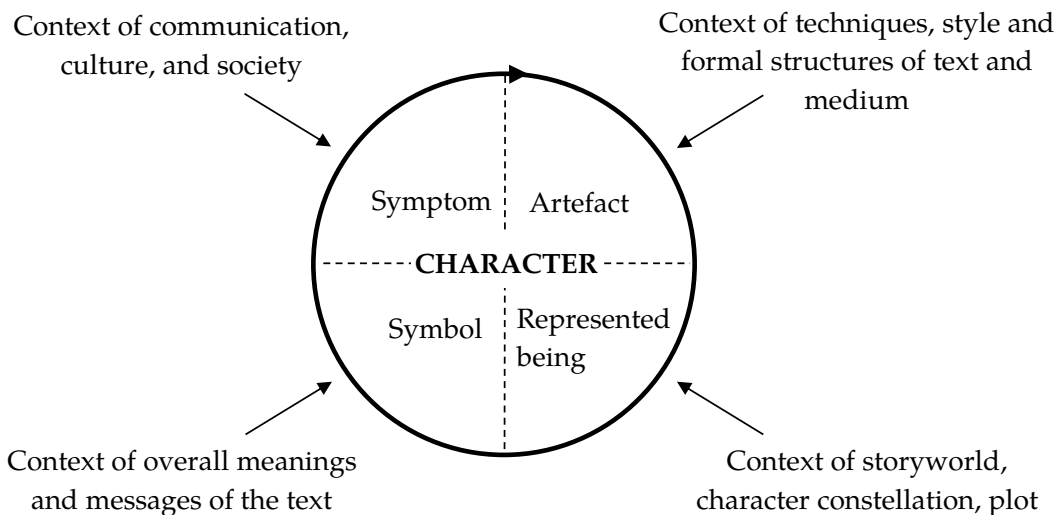


Diagram 5 Different contexts of characters as represented beings, artefacts, symbols, and symptoms

Plot and character constellation are two particularly important contexts that also show how the four aspects of a character are interconnected (see Diagram 5 and Chapter 9 and

Chapter 10). The character constellation places the individual character in a network of relations with other characters: hierarchies, similarities and contrasts, general actantial roles, as well as specific values, interactions, and communications. As leading and supporting characters, they are part of an attentional hierarchy; as protagonists or antagonists, they are part of conflicts and actions; as heroes or villains, they are part of a system of values; as parallel or contrasting characters, they are compared with one another. The position of a character within such a network, their isolation from, or position within, particular groups is part of their characterisation and influences their relevance to the themes and messages of a film. Character constellations range from the single protagonist to the large ensemble, and they show various typical patterns (see Chapter 10).

The area of motivation—drives, values, desires, emotions, goals, and plans—belongs not only to the core of a character's personality but constitutes also its interface with (usually conflict-ridden) actions and narrative plots. There are typical patterns in regard to the characters' motives that drive the plot, for instance different kinds of needs, relations with social groups, altruism and egoism, or conflicting goals. Models developed for the practical analysis of film scripts may be helpful in identifying them (see Chapter 9). The core motives of the characters not only form an important basis for evaluative and affective responses to them, but also for establishing the themes of a film.

A further central point that the Character Clock illustrates is the multi-layered relationship between audiences and characters, particularly concerning affective or emotional involvement (see Diagram 6). For a long time, only the area of represented beings was considered in this regard, in particular phenomena like sympathy or empathy. In connection with developments in affect studies and emotion research, the proposed model opens up new possibilities to describe viewers' affective responses to represented beings more comprehensively and to also take into account responses to characters as artefacts, symbols, and symptoms. In the area of represented beings, the relationship between viewers and characters is often described as one of identification, empathy, moral evaluation, or parasocial interaction. These concepts are unclear, however, and do less than justice to the actual variety of viewer reactions (see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14). This variety includes a sense of spatial proximity and accompaniment through time, understanding inner processes and approaching mental perspectives, social comparisons, feelings of shared identities and group memberships, impressions of familiarity and similarity, projection of desires, imagined interactions and—in connection with all this—affective involvement ranging from mere curiosity or ridicule to fascination to compassion and bodily contagion. The diverse possibilities lead to differing attitudes of viewers: they can view characters from the position of external observers, participant 'empathisers', or distanced analysts, can experience them as imaginary interaction partners or as avatars of themselves (see also Grodal 2001). Numerous factors are already at work in creating sympathy and empathy with

characters, among them deep-seated biological triggers, emotional memories, moral and aesthetic evaluations, cultural rules of emotion, wish projections, and simulative co-experience (Eder 2003a, 2007b). Moreover, characters can trigger affective processes not only as represented beings, they can also do so as artefacts, symbols, and symptoms. As an artefact, a character can evoke sensual, aesthetic experiences and value judgements; as a symbol, it can challenge our own identity through its associated meanings; as a symptom, it can stimulate hopes or fears of its social effects and praise or criticism for its creators.

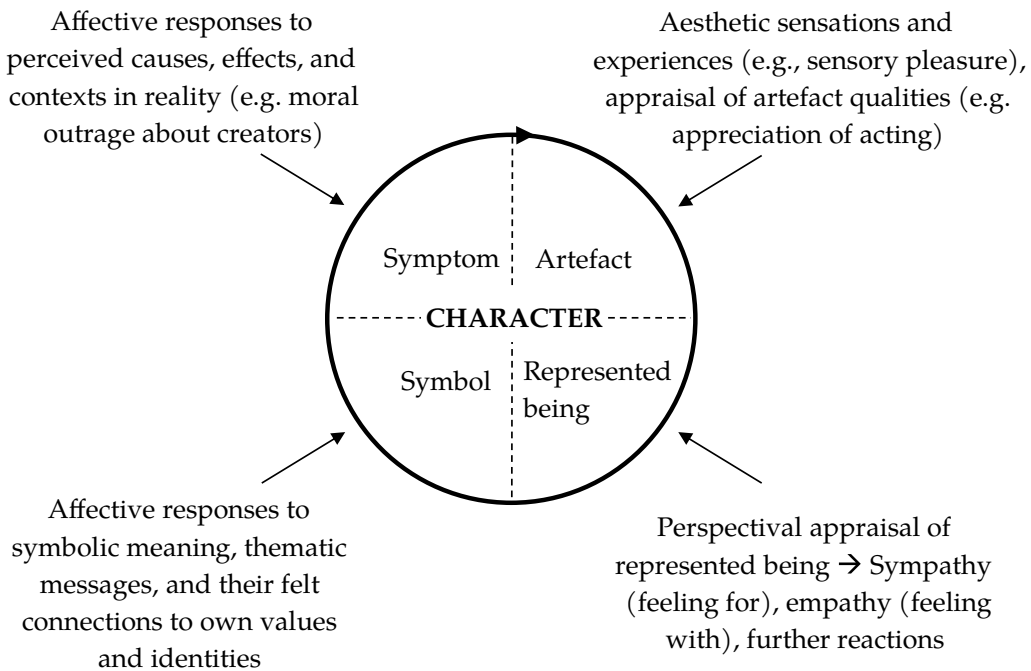


Diagram 6 Different kinds of affective responses to characters as represented beings, artefacts, symbols, and symptoms

4.4 Differentiating the Model: The Specificity and Mediality of Characters

The Character Clock is merely a starting point; the basic model can be differentiated further by means of more detailed heuristics that enable us to study and discuss characters more precisely. To begin with, several general categories may be distinguished within each quarter of the clock. The overview of the basic structures of characters in this chapter prepares the further considerations of the following chapters and places them in a systematic framework. At the same time, the general core model is made more concrete in its heuristic function, thus clarifying which properties of characters require particular attention in analysis. So, what are the fundamental structures of

characters as represented beings, artefacts, symbols, and symptoms? Or, starting from the reception processes: What kinds of properties in these dimensions can be assigned to characters by reconstructing their empirical, intended, or ideal reception?

Characters as represented beings may be ascribed physical, mental, and social features, modes of behaviour, and relations in the past, present, and future. These properties may be stable or transitory, perceptible, or imperceptible. Some represented beings are animals or plants, extra- or supernatural, artificial or hybrid, but most of them are human or anthropomorphic. For this reason, properties that are important in human social reality are particularly relevant. Among them are physical features like external appearance, age, or bodily skills; psychological properties such as personality traits, perceptions, thoughts, and emotions; and social properties such as relationships, roles, and status. Various disciplines from the humanities and human sciences are helpful in describing such structures. The differences between characters and real beings must not be neglected, however. After all, characters relate in various ways to concepts about reality, and often serve to expand human thinking.

Characters also have complex structures as artefacts. These include media-specific means of representation, such as written and spoken language, acting, camera work, sound design, or editing. Moreover, some elements of the storyworld—objects, environments, names—function as means of characterisation if they express the inner and social lives of the characters. More abstract representational structures concern, for example, how and when certain information about a character is made accessible in the course of a narrative or argument. Finally, combinations of various stylistic features form specific patterns of representation, such as the degree of realism, coherence, or dynamism of a character.

On the symbolic level one can start out from the general observation that the represented being and the form of its representation may activate higher-level ideas in the viewers' minds by way of associative, metaphorical, or metonymic processes (see Chapter 11). These may refer to real or mythical persons, archetypes or social groups, abstract ideas, virtues or vices, messages or thoughts. Often such symbolic inferences are assumed to have been intended by the producers (or implied authors).

This is not always the case with inferences about the characters as *symptoms*. Here the character is placed in—predominantly causal—relationships with elements of the communication process and its contexts. The most important points of reference here seem to be creators, recipients, communication situations, and other media texts. For example, the creators' mental dispositions may be seen as reasons or causes for the specific portrayal of the characters. Regarding the recipients, the lasting effects of characters as exemplary figures or behavioural models are of significance. With reference to more general sociocultural contexts of production and reception, characters may be understood as social stereotypes, or as generalised images of mentality or humanity. The symbolic and the symptomatic features of characters are closely connected and are therefore often dealt with together. However, in the light

of the results achieved so far, their analytical separation seems appropriate. Theories developed in the study of literature and the arts help to distinguish between different kinds of indirect meaning communicated through characters at the symbolic level. As to their symptomatic value, communicative pragmatics, discourse analysis, and sociology may be used to differentiate between different kinds of connections that characters may have with reality.

The differentiation of the basic model according to these general categories will probably be relatively straightforward, because other theories make comparable distinctions. However, the major groups of theories differ strongly as to their focus: structuralism concentrates on characters as artefacts, cognitive theories concentrate on the responses to represented beings, hermeneutics and psychoanalysis prefer symbolic and thematic perspectives, whereas psychoanalysis and cultural studies consider characters more as symptomatic products or factors of individual and sociocultural conditions. The Character Clock may help to combine such diverse theories of character in order to model each one of the aspects more precisely.

In trying to implement such an approach, however, considerable differences between the theories soon become apparent. When it comes to specifics, many of the models involved in these theories are incompatible. This becomes particularly clear in the area of the psychological aspects of human characters: should one describe Rick Blaine's psyche using models of folk psychology, scientific psychology, psychoanalysis, or cognitive science? When is it sensible to claim that he suffers from the consequences of an Oedipus complex, that he is an introvert in the sense of the 'Big Five' personality dimensions, or that his personal information processing is heavily conditioned by his long-term memory ('We'll always have Paris')?

As statements about characters ultimately rest on a reconstruction of empirical, intended, or ideal character reception, decisions to choose a specific system of concepts depend on two things: the general reception model and the aim of the analysis. I suggest a reception model anchored in cognitive science. However, this does not mean that one necessarily has to use cognitivist terminology to describe a character's psyche or mind. The question is instead that of the mental dispositions attributed to the producers and recipients. Does the investigation concern ideal, intended, or empirical reception in the past, present, or future? The intended purpose of the analysis and the question of whom one wants to convince or persuade are also decisive for the choice of categories. The cognitivist approach to character analysis suggested here provides a solid basis to decide for or against the integration of particular theories and conceptual systems. It does not, however, require the use of specialised terminology from cognitive science (e.g., for the description of the psyche or mind of characters); in most cases, formulations in ordinary language are more adequate.

The Character Clock is generally applicable to characters in film, television, online video, literature, theatre, and other non-interactive media, because the most basic

structures of characters and their reception are similar in these media.⁵ Moreover, the model also indicates how to deal in more differentiated ways with the specific mediality of characters. In general terms, each of the four aspects of characters can be differentiated according to the characteristic affordances of the medium in which they appear. A few examples:

- At the level of artefacts, the question is what media-specific means and structures are used to represent characters in film, television, books, or other media. Literary characters, for example, are characterised exclusively by means of written language. In films, by contrast, moving images, sounds, and spoken language are in the foreground, and characters are represented by actors. The media differ, furthermore, in the frequency of particular structural patterns: in literature the inner life of characters is often expressed directly by means of language; in films, by contrast, it is usually conveyed more indirectly through nonverbal behaviour, situational context, and audiovisual style.
- At the level of represented beings, the question is how the development and the resulting forms of mental models in various media differ, and how this may lead to certain tendencies in each medium concerning the kinds and features of represented beings. Can beings that are represented audiovisually be recognised more quickly? Are character models in films more visual, detailed, and vivid than in literature? Do they tend to contain different constellations of properties, e.g., more external than internal, more physical than psychological features? And what does this mean for the affective responses of the audience?
- At the level of symbols, the question is what forms of character-related symbolism and themes are possible in the given medium, which of these are particularly widespread, and why this should be the case. Is it true, for instance, that symbolic characters are more common in literature than in film? Or do film characters convey their higher meanings only in a less obtrusive manner?
- At the symptom level, each medium is governed by certain dominant practices that affect characters, which in turn has consequences for their sociocultural causes and effects. For example, how does the collective production in Hollywood cinema—compared to the individual author in literature—affect the symptomatology of the characters? What different effects do characters have on typical film, literary, or theatre audiences? Which sociocultural contexts have a particularly strong influence on the

⁵ However, the model is not sufficient for analysing interactive characters, e.g., in computer games, and has to be modified and supplemented for this purpose (see Schröter and Thon 2014; Blom 2021).

representation of characters in film, television, and literature respectively?
 And what inter-media relationships are established, e.g., by adapting
 characters more often from literature into films than vice versa?

Questions of all these kinds have only very scantily been dealt with so far, and the Character Clock makes it possible to clarify their foundations and to investigate them in a systematic way.

4.5 Integrating the Structural Aspects: *The Marriage of Maria Braun*

After all these abstract considerations, it is time for an example. Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (*Die Ehe der Maria Braun*) is a suitable case because this drama provoked so many questions and discussions among viewers, as well as different interpretations by film critics (see Bae 2005; Rheuban 1991): Why do the characters behave so strangely? Why are their narrative and aesthetic forms so unusual? How should one interpret them and the film as a whole? In the face of such questions, analysis might seek to understand how different groups of viewers see the characters, to explore why certain assumptions about the characters' traits are controversial among them, to identify Fassbinder's intended interpretation, or to suggest a particularly plausible or interesting one.

Frequently, such analyses will begin with the investigation of the represented beings. *The Marriage of Maria Braun* shows how the pretty, young Maria carries on various love affairs and manages to become a successful businesswoman in post-war Germany between 1945 and 1954. Not only her appearance and environments change during that time, but so does her psyche and personality. While Maria's outward development can be understood relatively easily, her inner life and social relationships demand interpretation. The most important starting points are the situations she is in, what she says, and how she behaves. From them we can apply different (folk)theories to develop ideas about her personality, thoughts, feelings, motives, social roles, and other features. However, this can lead to quite different results, and Maria's external situations and behaviour in the storyworld are not the only relevant sources of information about her.

Most viewers seem to agree about many of Maria's traits. Right from the start she shows a high degree of self-confidence, intelligence, courage, willpower, pragmatism, and single-mindedness. Her passionate emotionality is kept under strict control, and whenever necessary she coldly pushes others out of the way, but also does not spare herself. She resolutely pursues the goal of a materially secured marriage with the 'love of her life', her husband Hermann. Although she only has 'half a day and a night' together with him before he goes missing at the front, she does not give up hope. It is not until Hermann has been declared dead that she starts a new life with the Black GI Bill. Bill is a tender, loving man, and she becomes pregnant from him. But then Hermann suddenly walks through the door (see Figure 2). In the resulting fight Maria kills Bill. Later, she also aborts their child.

At this point at the latest, it becomes more difficult to understand Maria's inner life and her behaviour. Did she want to kill Bill, or did she just want to incapacitate him? What role did calculation or racism play? Was it murder or unintentional manslaughter? Did Maria want to come to the aid of Hermann, who had lost to Bill; did she want to spare him a humiliation or prove to him that she had always been his faithful wife? All these possibilities remain open. But there are deeper questions about Maria's motives. While it is clear that she wants a life together with Hermann, it remains unclear why exactly she pursues this goal, what deep-seated motives drive her. The most obvious and culturally normative motive, which she herself explicitly proclaims, would be 'true love'. However, some of her behaviour casts considerable doubt on this. Her encounters with Hermann show strikingly little tenderness, in stark contrast to her being with Bill. So does Maria's obsessive pursuit of this goal, which dominates her entire life, really stem from an emotional need or is it perhaps rather the result of sentimental ideals, internalised norms, learned behavioural patterns, or repressed desires? The answers ultimately depend on the psychological models one wishes to apply.

How one understands Maria is equally decisive for making sense of the actions that follow. Hermann takes responsibility for the killing and goes to prison. He also passively accepts all further decisions that Maria makes. She promises to wait for him and set up a home for the two of them. Through her own initiative she meets the elderly businessman, Carl Oswald, becomes his mistress, and takes on an executive position in his business. Hermann goes along with this. Maria quickly rises in social status and begins to enjoy her material and sexual power, as well as her self-sufficiency. But her style of living makes her lonely, she loses her social contacts, becomes estranged from her family, and keeps herself at a distance from Oswald. She finally ends up an unhappy and ill-tempered woman.

Maria's mental and social development is made so obvious in several scenes that most viewers will probably experience it very similarly. Again, however, questions arise as to deep-seated psychological causes and motivations. Does Maria really love Hermann, or is her alleged love merely the personal justification of her pursuit of quite different goals? Are the relationships with her partners and her social ascent fashioned by materialist and sexual pragmatism, sentimental idealism, sado-masochistic power games, a tendency to submit to father figures, the desire for self-determination and moral self-aggrandisement, the interplay of all these factors, or some other reasons? And what causes Maria's unhappiness? The frustration of waiting for Hermann, her obsessive fixation on him, the continuous suppression and control of her emotions, or the sexual and moral corruption accompanying her rise to the top?

The following course of action in the film does not free Maria from her unhappiness. When Hermann is released from prison, he avoids her and leaves the country immediately, purportedly to make his fortune abroad so that he can stand up to Maria as an equally successful partner. Maria goes on waiting. When Hermann comes to

visit her years later and shortly after Oswald's death, there is no rapprochement. The reading of Oswald's will reveals that Hermann had made a pact with the terminally ill Oswald to leave Maria to him until his death. The will praises Hermann's noble spirit and signs half the inheritance over to him. Maria is hit extremely hard by these revelations, which devalue both her supposed self-sufficiency and Hermann's love. When she lights a cigarette at the kitchen stove, she ignites a gas explosion that kills Hermann and herself. At the same time, a reporter on the radio is celebrating Germany's winning the soccer world cup.

This ending intensifies the questions raised previously, in particular about the relationship between Maria and Hermann. What thoughts and emotions does Maria have when she learns of the deal between Hermann and Oswald? Does she cause the gas explosion in a state of shock, absentmindedly, or deliberately out of desperation about her devalued life? Does the pact between Hermann and Oswald show that neither of them really respected and loved Maria? Or does it show a kind of love that is deformed by the way Maria is treated as an object? Is Hermann driven by pure materialism and opportunism? Does he play a sado-masochistic power game with Maria; does he get revenge for his time in prison and for her lovers? Or can he only feel like a man by humiliating her, demonstrating his power and independence?

As this example shows, understanding represented beings may require quite a bit of interpretation. At least in the case of human protagonists in melodramas (like Maria), this applies particularly to their essential mental and social characteristics, among them complex personality traits, deep-seated motivational structures, overarching identity constructions, and multifaceted psychosocial interrelations. Which characteristics are ascribed may vary considerably, but they affect the further understanding of the characters, of their symbolic and symptomatic aspects. What general meanings a film may convey, what conclusions about sociocultural contexts it permits, depends—and certainly in the case of Maria Braun—to a large degree on what characteristics the portrayed individuals are seen as having. Often no simple answers can be found, but some more complex alternatives seem more convincing than others. The task then is to see how proper answers can best be derived and made plausible.

Trying to determine the intended or ideal reception of characters provides a general starting point. How should viewers understand and experience Maria Braun according to Fassbinder's intentions or to relevant criteria of communication and interpretation? It is important to keep in mind that reception is not restricted to the domain of the fictional world. Among other things, indications as to how represented persons should be understood can also be derived from how they are portrayed in the film. In regard to the artefact aspect, the traits and behaviours of Maria Braun, played by the film star Hanna Schygulla, are presented in a characteristic style that creates a special experience and breaks with expectations based on genre or reality. The way in which information is at first conveyed about her seems in ways similar to classic Hollywood melodrama. The protagonists live out a closed melodramatic plot full of coincidences and strokes of fate,

try hard to fulfil their desires, but fail due to social conditions, unfortunate accidents, and internalised norms. The way the plot presents character-related information, however, is remarkably unusual and elliptical. Central experiences of the characters are left out; their motives are not shown clearly and remain vague. Thus, Maria's love for Hermann is not shown in scenes of closeness between the two, but only asserted in words. In contrast, Maria and Bill appear in long scenes of intimacy, even though she kills him shortly afterwards. All this is apparently part of a strategy to raise doubts about the genuineness of Maria's 'true love' and make it appear to be an empty, illusory ideal.

The means of filmic representation also show deviations from conventional realism. Particularly striking is a general artificiality or stylisation that goes beyond and is qualitatively different from the hyperbolic style of classical melodrama. This concerns first of all the style of acting. The dialogue is overly concise and compact, the manner of speaking theatrical, the accentuation too restrained or too laden with pathos. Movements often appear exaggerated, mechanical, and unnatural. When Hermann returns from the war and surprises Maria and Bill, he slaps her face and she falls to the ground in a strange rotating movement. Bill then wrestles with Hermann in a way that resembles a kind of consoling, embracing hug more than a fight. None of these actions expresses the physical and mental energies that most viewers would expect: Hermann's slap seems unmotivated because he shows no emotion, Maria's fall does not fit the force of the slap. On the one hand, this makes it conspicuously clear that something is being narrated and represented here, and on the other hand, it makes the body language and emotional expression of the characters more difficult to read. Even more importantly, the artificiality of the staging makes the schematic nature of the characters' behaviour visible. The characters' bodily movements and expressions thus already indicate that they are acting according to internalised role patterns, behavioural norms, and stereotypes instead of genuine emotions and desires.

These modes of representation make it difficult to sympathise with Maria and to share her feelings. The viewers are generally kept at an analytical distance in a way that recalls Brecht's epic theatre. This is intended to have them think about the chances Maria had and what may have brought about her situation. At the same time, certain other aspects of mise-en-scene tend to have strong sensory effects. This concerns in particular the impressions created by the staged living environments. The shift in the colour scheme from the dusty greys and browns of the war years to brighter colours and brilliant, expensive looking materials highlight Maria's material success. Simultaneously, Maria is increasingly hemmed in both by the framing and by her costumes, which give a tangible impression of the narrowing of her social world. Often, this happens in a highly accentuated and conspicuous manner, for instance, by the use of frames, mirrors, and grids (see Figure 28). Furthermore, in the course of the narration, many other objects and events are introduced as relatively obvious symbols to characterise the people. Cigarettes, for instance, suggest associations of (emotional) dependence, corruptibility, yearnings, and the craving for life. Maria dies after lighting a cigarette.

The sound design of the film is perhaps even more striking. This is true of the way the characters speak as well as of their entire acoustic environment. For instance, the sound of a pneumatic drill creates a very unpleasant atmosphere and simultaneously recalls the rebuilding of the German economy after the war. Music is rarely used to create and support an emotional atmosphere; more often it contrasts with the feeling of the situation expressed by the pictures. Several times, Maria's actions are combined with (real historical) radio recordings, which comment on what is happening: her search for Hermann is accompanied by announcements of the names of missing persons, her later rise in business by speeches by chancellor Adenauer, her death by the legendary sports report on the soccer game as Germany became world champion in 1954.

This conspicuous, reflexive manner of representation confirms the impression that Maria herself is a symbolic character: she apparently embodies post-war Germany or the Germans in general. Statements by the director Fassbinder and numerous other pieces of evidence confirm this, such as the name 'Maria Braun' (recalling both the Virgin Mary and Hitler's partner Eva Braun), the choice of the period, the use of pictures of Hitler and Adenauer to frame her story, the many motifs and themes prototypically associated with Germany. But what exactly does Maria stand for? The answers to this question will chiefly depend on the analysis of the character as a represented being and as an artefact. Maria obviously exemplifies, amongst other things, the material success of the German economic miracle and the associated emotional suppression preventing a genuine new beginning. Maria—and 'the Germans'—are still suffering from the consequences of the war but remain incapable of truly understanding it. Instead, they devote themselves to abstract, absolute ideals, ruthlessly pursue materialist goals, become unhappy and incapable of true feeling. A more positive evaluation of Maria's behaviour and symbolic meaning might also be conceivable but seems less convincing.

On a symptomatic level, the character Maria indicates the critical view of German post-war history that was common amongst intellectuals in the late 1970s, when the film was made. In their view, the continued suppression of the Nazi past had stealthily established a new kind of authoritarianism. (In one of the scenes, Maria wears clothes from the seventies, an anachronism that may be understood as a clear hint.) The character Maria also suggests autobiographical references to themes that informed Fassbinder's life (sado-masochism, exhibitionism, the relationship between love and power) or may be interpreted as reflecting Fassbinder's image of women and his views of contemporary society. As the film was successful at festivals and at the box office, it is not inconceivable that the character Maria, apart from its mooring in these sociocultural factors, had some effects on German viewers' understanding of themselves and their history, as well as the image of Germany abroad.

Of course, the characters of *Maria Braun* could be examined in much greater precision based on stylistic analysis and contextual information, for example about historical modes of production and contemporary audiences, or about interactions

between members of the film team. However, the brief analysis here already hints at some central issues of an analysis of characters as represented beings, artefacts, symbols, and symptoms. It shows how closely these four aspects are interrelated and that it is important to examine them in relation to each other. Moreover, the example shows how analysis in each of the four aspects can lead to controversial statements that can be specified and tested with the help of the Character Clock and analytical categories developed in later chapters.

4.6 Approaching Characters' Realities: *Yellow Fever*

My second example contrasts strongly with Fassbinder's *Maria Braun* and lets very different facets of characters emerge. *Yellow Fever* (2012) is a short, animated documentary by Kenyan filmmaker Ng'endo Mukii that investigates the impact of racist, white beauty ideals on women with darker skin. The film was accessible on the Criterion Channel and (in a small-format version) on Mukii's website, where she writes the following about it:

I am interested in the concept of skin and race, and what they imply; in the ideas and theories sown into our flesh that change with the arc of time. The idea of beauty has become globalised, creating homogenous aspirations, and distorting people's self-image across the planet. In my film, I focus on African women's self-image, through memories and interviews; using mixed media to describe this almost schizophrenic self-visualization that I and many others have grown up with. (Mukii 2018)

In less than seven minutes, the award-winning short succeeds in making viewers aware of the complex psychosocial and bodily effects of colourism and racist beauty norms.⁶ To achieve that, the mixed media production interweaves animation, found footage, live-action performances, and pixilation with an eloquent voice-over, music, and sound effects. Structurally, Mukii's film combines an autobiographical first-person narrative with interviews and poetic rhetoric. In the first two minutes, the filmmaker recounts how she and her sister visited a hair salon as children to have straight nylon hair braided onto their heads. Her hairdresser is a 'mkorogo' (mixture)—she has dark skin but 'could only afford enough beauty cream to bleach her hands and face which are now...yellow'. This memory prompts the grown-up Mukii to interview her aged mother and little niece to find out how Western norms of beauty are passed on through generations. Her mother confesses she had simply acted unthinkingly according to these norms when she made her daughters straighten their hair back then. Her niece, obviously influenced by television programmes and advertising, today still expresses a desire to have 'white hair and white skin', even though the discrepancy with her own image in the mirror makes her feel 'a little bit uncomfortable'.

⁶ These effects have also been investigated by various empirical studies, see for example Harper and Choma 2019; Hall 2021. On colourism, see Hunter 2021 and Reddy 2021.



Fig. 6 The little girl in Ng'endo Mukii's *Yellow Fever* imagines having 'white skin' like the models on television. (Dir. Ng'endo Mukii, *Yellow Fever*, 2012, Royal College of Art, UK. All rights reserved.)

Both Mukii's childhood memory and her present-day conversations are rendered through drawn and rotoscoped animation, highly stylised with bold contours and vibrant colours.⁷ These animated parts of the film are interwoven, connected, and commented on by a formally contrasting sequence of found footage, live-action, and pixilation. Here, the filmmaker acts as what we might call a 'narrhetor', a narrator and rhetor at the same time. In evocative language, her voice-over reflects on the connections between the use of bleaching cream, the beauty ideal of whiteness, and racist colonial history. A fast-paced collage of historical illustrations (including distorting caricatures and pseudo-scientific pictures of Sarah Baartman) provides a maximally condensed reminder of the hurtful, othering ways in which white colonisers portrayed Africans.⁸ The live-action passages show the expressive bodies of performers, mostly in close shots. A dancer with light brown skin is encircled by bottles of bleaching cream and haunted by a dark-skinned alter ego—'the you, you imagine yourself to be, the one you hate, you despise'—who then takes her place through a stop-motion trick. In close-ups, the performers' shaking torsos seem to be torn from within (an effect of pixilation and jump cuts), until their bones break with gruesome noise (an effect of sound design). African landscapes and discriminatory imagery are superimposed on the torsos, whose dark skin thus literally appears as a projection surface of racist imaginations. The film ends on Mukii's words: 'The fault lines within, we overwrite with borders; hierarchies of beauty cut into our skin, never admitting that we are all just a little bit uncomfortable'.

7 On animation and representations of race, with some references to Mukii's film, see Reinerth and Philippi 2021.

8 On Baartman, see Gordon-Chipembere 2011.

The characters in *Yellow Fever* are five Kenyan women, four of them members of the same family. Filmmaker Ng'endo Mukii appears both as a voice-over narrator and in different times of the diegesis. As a child in the first part of the film, she is accompanied by her sister and encounters the hairdresser. As a grown-up, she later interviews her mother Margaret Njeri Mereka and her niece Abriana 'Abby' Njeri. The other human figures in the film are not recognisable inhabitants of the storyworld and thus cannot be considered characters: the four live-action performers serve as mere symbols expressing the feelings of the five Kenyans (and other Black women). Any further figures only flash up as pictures in historical media or on television.

The five characters of *Yellow Fever* are very different from the characters of feature films such as *Maria Braun*. For one thing, they are not intended to be read as merely fictional. Whether the film is understood as autofictional or autobiographical: Mukii's voice-over establishes a particularly strong, indexical, and privileged reference to reality, as the filmmaker's own voice tells of her own experiences. All characters, including Mukii herself as a child and an interviewer, appear within the frame of this first-person narrative, whereas most feature films present their characters without the mediating level of a personal narrator. Moreover, the voices of Mukii's mother and her niece seem to be taken from real interviews.

In contrast to long narrative films, the short, rhetorical documentary also characterises its *represented persons* through a highly condensed selection of physical, mental, and social features. Mukii's film focuses very precisely on those mental traits and experiences that also form its theme. These are the characters' desires and fears, their inner conflicts and divided self-images that result from racist beauty ideals, including feelings of discontent with one's own body, of inferiority, self-loathing, and subliminal unease. Accordingly, the film also concentrates on only those physical and social characteristics that are closely connected to such experiences. Among the character's physical features, their hair texture and skin colour are emphasised, particularly the contrast between dark and light skin. Their social features centre on relationships with family, history, and media that spread the insidious ideals of white female beauty. Beyond this focused set of physical, mental, and social characteristics, we learn very little about the represented beings, their personalities, life stories, wants and needs, actions and transformations—features that are developed extensively in long fiction films. Their aspiration to 'multidimensionality' of characters would be misguided in a rhetorical short.

Considered as *artefacts*, the characters of *Yellow Fever* differ even more clearly from those of typical movies. For one thing, they are created from extremely heterogeneous audiovisual material. The rapid succession of contrasting images and the high density of information sometimes make it difficult to identify the individual characters, and the blending of their experiences conveys the commonality of the latter. The most important sources of information are acoustic: Mukii's rhetorically strong voice-over, the soundbites from real conversations, and sound designs such as the terrible cracking of

bones. On the visual level, the animated sequences show the external appearances and situations of the characters. The animation of their faces, bodies, and clothes appears deceptively simple at first glance with its bold contours, clear shapes, two-dimensional surfaces, and bright, warm colours. Yet the drawn images are full of meaningful details that cannot be grasped at once, and the faces and movements of the characters seem hyperexpressive and realistic at the same time, because they are partly based on photographic images by way of the rotoscoping technique. Sometimes photographic elements are inserted directly into the drawn images, for example to emphasise the texture of hair. The combination of animated and photographic pictures is also used to create a metamorphosis: When Abby exclaims that she wants to magically change 'into white hair and white skin', her face is replaced by the photographic collage of a white girl's head. While the film's animated sequences show the outward appearance of the characters, their most crucial inner experiences are conveyed primarily through live-action, pixilation, and found footage. The performances by dancers with light and dark skin serve as metaphors to illustrate the characters' inner conflicts and the discrepancy between their self-images and Western beauty standards. The discomfort of these conflicts is suggested through pixilation, where the live-action is fractured into individual shots with choppy jump cuts in between. Together with the sound design, this invites somatic empathy. Crucial contents and sources of the characters' inner worlds are shown in the found footage from colonial images and current commercials.

As artefacts, the characters are strikingly expressive; as depicted persons, they are characterised by a condensed and specific set of features. Both indicates their strongly symbolic quality. We are dealing here with two levels of symbolism. The five Kenyan women represent experiences and inner conflicts shared by many Black women. The performers in the live-action sequences, again, symbolise the inner conflicts of both the five characters in particular and Black women in general. The film conveys this double symbolism by interweaving its autobiographical narrative with a generalising rhetoric. On the one hand, the individual feelings of Mukii, her mother, her niece, and the hairdresser are generalised, for example through the voice-over commentary and the metaphorical sequences in which African landscapes are superimposed on female bodies. On the other hand, the biographical references to concrete personal experiences of the characters lend vividness and authenticity to the general messages. These functions of the characters, in interplay with other elements of the film, allow its overarching meaning to emerge. The title of the film, *Yellow Fever*, alludes to Fela Kuti's eponymous song, which denounces the use of bleaching cream by Black women from a male, patriarchal point of view. However, Mukii's examination of the globalised hierarchies of desirability and of human beauty under the conditions of postcolonial power structures opposes Kuti's polemic. By adopting an autobiographical perspective and making the women's inner conflicts movingly comprehensible, Mukii opens up a feminist reassessment of the subject. In doing so, she seems to follow the autoethnographic-psychoanalytical tradition of Frantz Fanon's

Black Skin, White Masks (1952), but complements and updates Fanon's reflections from a female, contemporary perspective. In addition, her criticism of the internalisation of white beauty ideals could be linked to bell hooks' call for 'Loving Blackness as Political Resistance' (1992: 9–20) as well as current discussions of colourism and beauty politics (Hunter 2021; Reddy 2021).

As a documentary or autofictional film, *Yellow Fever* establishes direct references to reality and invites us to interpret the characters also as symptoms of various individual and societal causes and effects. On a general level, studies show that bleaching creams are a billion-dollar business that causes millions of cases of severe health damage worldwide every year (Hall 2021). On an individual level, the autobiographical film establishes close connections between Mukii as a character, as a narrator, and as the real filmmaker—after all, we hear Mukii's own voice, talking about her own experiences and with her own family members. Such biographical connections are further strengthened by the fact that Mukii's film currently circulates not only at festivals and on the Criterion Channel, but also on her website, her Vimeo channel, and her Facebook profile, which offer more information about the filmmaker as well as opportunities of virtual interaction. Comments from Facebook users expressing their feelings about the film and sometimes sharing their own experiences suggest possible effects of empowering women, strengthening their self-esteem and body positivity, and mitigating harmful ideals of beauty. By way of 'ambassadorial empathy' (Keen 2007), the film and its characters can also influence viewers like me who are neither female nor Black. This is also indicated by the fact that the film has been used for teaching on Swiss high schools and that the learning material makes close connections between the experiences of the characters and the students (Gersbach and Güdel 2015). Of course, white viewers cannot grasp the experiences of Black women in their full depth, but films can certainly invite empathy and solidarity.

4.7 How to Use the Character Clock

My brief analyses of *Maria Braun* and *Yellow Fever* cannot do justice to the complexity of these films and their characters. Most of the short case studies in this book are intended primarily to illustrate the amazing variety of characters and the crucial questions they can raise in analysis. The comparison of the two films already shows that characters can be fictional, auto- or non-fictional, focused on specific traits, and that they can appear in long and short, narrative and rhetorical, classical and experimental, historical and contemporary, live-action and animated films (and many other media with even more diverse affordances). In all these cases, the characters take on different forms as represented beings, artefacts, symbols, and symptoms.

The two examples of a German auteur film and an auto- or non-fictional animated short film by a Kenyan filmmaker also offer a complement to the usual focus on Hollywood movie characters in most film theories (including large parts of this book).

Despite the great differences between the two films, there is an important commonality: both indicate how characters can serve as symbols to convey a critique of society, and how characters can be interpreted as symptoms of sociocultural causes and effects. These aspects have been largely neglected in the current film-theoretical treatment of characters, and therefore the book will keep coming back to them.

As the examples show, the general procedure of analysis using the Character Clock model involves reconstructing the empirical, intended, or ideal character reception, depending on the research question and the goal of analysis. The Character Clock can then be used as a flexible heuristic. The analysis of its four domains—the character as artefact, represented being, symbol, and symptom—need not follow in that order. This arrangement in the model merely reflects the steps in the reception of individual character representations: basic perception of signs, construction of a mental model, exploration of indirect meanings and references to reality, and aesthetic reflection. It can be useful to follow this order in analysing single shots or scenes showing a character, particularly during the exposition. However, when analysing characters as a whole, it can often be better to start with their most striking features and move freely through the quarters of the clock model as required. For many characters it is their features as represented beings that are most striking, but for others the symbol, symptom, or artefact dimension may be most noticeable and the best point of departure.

Characters in mainstream, art-house, or experimental films, in documentaries, novels, plays, commercials, music videos, propaganda, or religious texts can challenge analytical attention in very different ways. In each case, however, we need differentiated categories in order to adequately examine the four dimensions of characters and their interrelationships. The following chapters will therefore present such analytical categories for each dimension and ask which structures are of central importance. Since the experience of characters as represented beings is their defining core, the general traits in this area will be discussed first: characters' corporeality, psyche, sociality, and behaviour (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6). On this basis, the aesthetic, narrative, experiential, and conventional structures of characters as artefacts will then be further differentiated (Chapter 7 and Chapter 8). Both as represented beings and as artefacts, characters are involved and interrelated in actions and plots (Chapter 9), as well as in character constellations (Chapter 10). Both are essential to the realisation of their symbolic functions (Chapter 11) and their connections to causes and effects in extratextual reality (Chapter 12). In all these respects, characters evoke various imaginative and affective responses in viewers (Chapter 13 and Chapter 14). In conclusion, these different ways of looking at characters are brought together in a theoretical overview (Chapter 15) and illustrated by a detailed case study (Chapter 16). At the end of most of the chapters that follow, the key findings are summarised in the form of guiding questions that can be applied practically in the analysis. The following questions can be used as a general starting point.

4.8 Guidelines for Getting Started: The Most General Questions of Character Analysis

1. What is the aim and purpose of the analysis? Does it aim at aesthetic appreciation, hermeneutic understanding, creative production, or sociocultural reflection and critique? And depending on that: Is the analysis about the intended, ideal, or empirical reception of characters, and if the latter, of which historical, present, or future audiences?
2. What sociocultural and media dispositions of the relevant audience can be assumed in processes of character reception? Which kinds of knowledge and affect structures are activated by the media text and shape the understanding of the character? Does the text play on common biases and reaction patterns to influence inferences about the characters' traits?
3. Which everyday, cultural, or scientific theories and categories are best suited to describe the character and justify statements about it in view of the audience dispositions (e.g., folk psychology, empirical psychology, psychoanalysis)?
4. Which features of the character are specific or typical for the medium or genre?
5. Which of the character's four dimensions are most important in the analysis: Is the character perceived predominantly as a represented being, artefact, symbol, or symptom?
6. What traits define the character as a represented being? What stable and variable qualities of body, psyche, sociality, and behaviour are shown, and what motives drive the character's actions? Is there a significant character arc; does the represented being change in the course of the narrative?
7. What are the qualities of the character as an artefact? How is it shaped by textual means and narrative structures, and how does this in turn shape the perceptual, cognitive, and affective experience of the audience? What general artefact properties does it exhibit (e.g., consistency, typification)? Does it correspond to conventional character conceptions in certain modes or genres of media production and reception? How is the character embedded in the aesthetic strategies of the media text as a whole?
8. How is the character embedded in the storyworld, the character constellation, and the plot? What are its most important relationships, interactions and conflicts in the storyworld as a social system and a system of values and perspectives?
9. In which aesthetic contexts of the artwork, its narrative and style, is the character situated, and what functions does it fulfil in them?

10. What qualities and functions does the character have as a symbol? What indirect, symbolic, or thematic meanings does it convey or contribute to? How is the character embedded in the overall meanings and themes of the text? What role does it play in their development?

11. What qualities define the character as a symptom? How is it embedded in the field of sociocultural causes and effects? Which contexts of production, medium, culture, and society have shaped the character? What effects does the character have on certain audiences, collective practices, and sociocultural discourses?

12. What imaginative and affective responses does the character elicit as a represented being, symbol, symptom and artefact, and in what ways? How does the work shape the relationships of the audience to the character in terms of mental perspective and imaginative closeness or distance? What are the most intense or crucial affects and emotions evoked by the character? How do these reactions compare with reactions to other characters?

PART III: CHARACTERS AS REPRESENTED BEINGS



Fig. 7 Rick Blaine's first appearance in *Casablanca* already characterises him in many ways. (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.)

Part III

We experience characters as represented beings, artefacts, symbols, and symptoms. In most cases, however, the first of these aspects dominates our experience, and many scholars largely limit their discussion to it. From this perspective, we respond to characters in much the same way as we do to real people in our environment, reacting to them as 'decoys of social conduct' (Schwender 2001) or engaging in 'parasocial interactions' with them (Giles 2002; Hartmann, Klimmt, and Schramm 2004). The

appeal of grasping their motivations, thoughts, and feelings is a major attraction of storytelling (Palmer 2004; Zunshine 2006). The protagonists in films like *Casablanca* or *The Marriage of Maria Braun* challenge our ability to understand people. Why does Rick relinquish Ilsa? Why does Maria kill her lover? What is going on inside them; what kind of personalities do they have? Understanding characters as symbols, symptoms, and artefacts goes beyond such questions, as the example of Maria Braun and later chapters of this book show, but it requires them to be answered first. To see how Rick or Maria are shaped by textual structures, what themes they embody, and what they tell us about society, we first need to have formed ideas of them as persons with particular traits. This is then the basis for more complex forms of reception.

Therefore, it makes sense to start from the core of characters when developing a theory about them. This core is the mental model of a being with an external appearance, a personality, an inner and social life. These are traits that the characters could also perceive in one another in the storyworld, considering each other as good or bad, attractive or unattractive, clever or not. If, however, they were to see each other as multidimensional, symbolical, or symptomatic, they would cross the borders of their world. Of course, we cannot equate characters with real people, but our knowledge about people plays a central role in how we perceive them.

In order to describe characters within their world more closely, it is helpful to draw on different human sciences. Theories of nonverbal communication can help describe their physical actions, personality psychology is useful in defining their inner life, and theories from sociology or social psychology can contribute to explaining their relationships and interactions. To find precise categories and expressions to describe and explain what is perceived and imagined in a film is important because imagining represented beings is by no means as simple as it might seem. In fact, it is amazing that projected images or printed letters can evoke the impression of a living being. Moreover, different people often experience these imagined beings in different ways. If we talk about them as audiences or artists, we need to find ways to put our complex sensory impressions and imaginations into language.

A look at an influential screenwriting manual, Linda Seger's *Creating Unforgettable Characters* (1990), may show what is involved here. Seger, who has consulted for many Hollywood scripts, presents the following suggestions about how to create successful characters. Realistic characters are shaped by a particular context of culture, place, time, and social activities (Seger 1990: Chapter 1), and especially by their past history (ibid.: Chapter 3). This backstory includes physical, psychological, and social developments, whereby emotions and motivation are particularly important. The external appearance of the character should also suggest psychological traits and processes. The psyche, or more precisely, the character's personality is at the core of Seger's concept, especially in regard to structuring the film (ibid.: Chapter 2). Characters should be given a clearly defined core personality that makes their actions seem consistent and intelligible. Apparently contradictory traits (paradoxes) create the

impression of complexity. Emotions, attitudes, and values round out this impression, and individual details make the character unique. Seger draws on psychoanalysis to fill in the contours of this centred personality structure (*ibid.*: Chapter 4). She defines the 'inner character' through four complexes of traits: the remembered life ('inner backstory'), the unconscious in the form of repressed experiences, the personality type, and the psychopathological tendencies ('abnormal behaviour') of the character. Seger emphasises personality types, working with the Greco-Roman concepts of 'melancholic, sanguine, choleric, and phlegmatic' temperaments and recommending Carl Gustav Jung's distinctions between introverts and extraverts and between thinking, feeling, sensation, and intuition. To make characters more interesting, they should be given psychopathological traits: manic, paranoid, and psychopathic tendencies for extraverts, depressive, schizophrenic, and neurotic aspects for introverts. The various character personalities are involved in social relationships, generally as couples or in triangles, that are characterised by attraction, conflicts, contrasts, and reciprocal influences (*ibid.*: Chapter 5). These common patterns of traits and relationships form the basis for further chapters in Seger's book, which delves deeper into dialogue, secondary characters, 'unrealistic' (non-human or symbolic) characters, and avoiding stereotypes (*ibid.*: Chapter 9).

Seger's screenwriting manual clearly sketches out a common basic pattern of character development that can also be found in how-to books for directing and acting and in statements by filmmakers, above all in numerous movies, and not just Hollywood productions.¹ The model she suggests corresponds to a particular concept of human nature and to a particular kind of storytelling and its aims. It raises several questions that also apply to other normative approaches to character design. How comprehensive and representative is it? Is it really suitable for use in conceiving and analysing characters? Does it have the right focus? Is it complete; does it pay attention to all the relevant aspects of characters? Does it only apply to 'realistic' mainstream characters, or to those in independent films and experimental artworks, as well? What alternatives are there to this model? How can one determine if a particular character corresponds to it? For example, what core personality does Rick Blaine have and what type does he fit? Is he an introverted, neurotic person or an extraverted thinker?

More generally, the example shows that we are faced with three central difficulties in analysing characters. The first is the choice of adequate concepts. Which concepts can be used to describe represented beings and their traits properly, to analyse them and explain our reactions to them? This question does not only apply to the words we use, but to the entire way we perceive imaginary beings. We reach different conclusions, depending on whether we make use of intuitive, everyday ideas, historical concepts, or current scientific approaches. Rick can only be seen as Oedipal if we view him from a psychoanalytical perspective. These considerations show that the choice of fitting concepts can only be

1 See the critical discussion in Blank 2001 and Dyer 1999: Chapter 7.

made if we reconstruct the (empirical, intended, or ideal) reception of characters (see Chapter 3).² Anyone trying to analyse Rick must find out what image of him certain audiences (are intended to) have. Thus, the first complex of questions is connected to a second one, which applies to grasping represented beings, especially those of a fictional kind. How do we perceive fictional characters, create a mental image of them, and link attributes to them? Which factors are involved in this process of ‘impression formation’ (Sanders 2010) and shape the similarities and differences among our ideas about a character? The answer to that will also be a prerequisite to understanding our *affective response* to represented persons (see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14). What perceptions, thoughts, and feelings do we have in regard to them? How do we react to them over time and what is the basis for those reactions? How can we feel close to fictional beings? Why do we love some, while others leave us indifferent?

The main goal of this part of the book is to gain an overview of the first two topics—how we form an image of represented beings and what means we can use to analyse them. To answer this question, I will combine various approaches to character reception.³ The focus will be on human or anthropomorphic characters, because they are the most common ones and most complex. Analysis of non-human characters can be derived from that with some modifications.⁴

Since it is necessary to reconstruct the reception in order to analyse characters, Chapter 5 will first discuss how we understand characters. I refer to this process, in which viewers create mental representations of characters, as character synthesis.⁵ It results in the formation of character models in the viewers’ minds. The abstraction of an ideal character model, which would be constructed in successful reception, leads us to the intersubjective character itself. Understanding how character synthesis works provides a starting point to develop more detailed categories for describing the trait structure of represented beings, their physical, mental, and social features

2 Text-oriented approaches simplify this significantly by implicitly presuming the success of fundamental processes of understanding. The means of characterisation are regarded as objective textual elements that are directly linked with the character. However, these elements—such as a character’s appearance—must be recognised first. Characterisation devices are available to viewers solely in the form of mental representations as well. In a sense, one could say they are preliminary results of information processing on the way to developing a character model. Only then do they functionally relate to the character, establishing it in terms of its traits; at the same time, the viewers’ mental dispositions play an essential role.

3 This will be based largely on the work of Ralf Schneider (2000), Uri Margolin (1990), Gerrig and Allbritton (1990), Jonathan Culpeper (2000), David Bordwell (1992), Per Persson (2003), and Murray Smith (1995). See also the summaries of research on mental modelling in Ohler 1994, Zwaan and Radvansky 1998, Schneider 2000, and on impression formation in Sanders 2010.

4 Non-human characters are often anthropomorphised and understood in an analogous way to humans, as in the case of R2D2 or Ava in *Ex Machina*. Even in the case of very different beings like the Alien, the model of human characters is helpful as a comparison. However, non-human characters, or ‘fantastikaracters’, may also widely diverge from the human model (Wiblé 2024).

5 The term draws on Wulff’s concept of character synthesis (1997: 13). Others use the terms ‘recognition’ (Smith 1995), ‘attribution’ (Gerrig and Allbritton 1990), ‘impression formation’ or ‘encoding’ (Hoorn and Konijn 2003).

and relations (in Chapter 6). Together these approaches to analysis will build a foundation to understand the design of characters as artefacts (Part IV of this book), their embedding in plots, constellations, and storyworlds (Part V), their symbolic and symptomatic qualities (Part VI,) as well as the imaginative and affective involvement with them (Part VII).⁶ The following diagram gives an overview of the aspects of character reception and their interrelations.

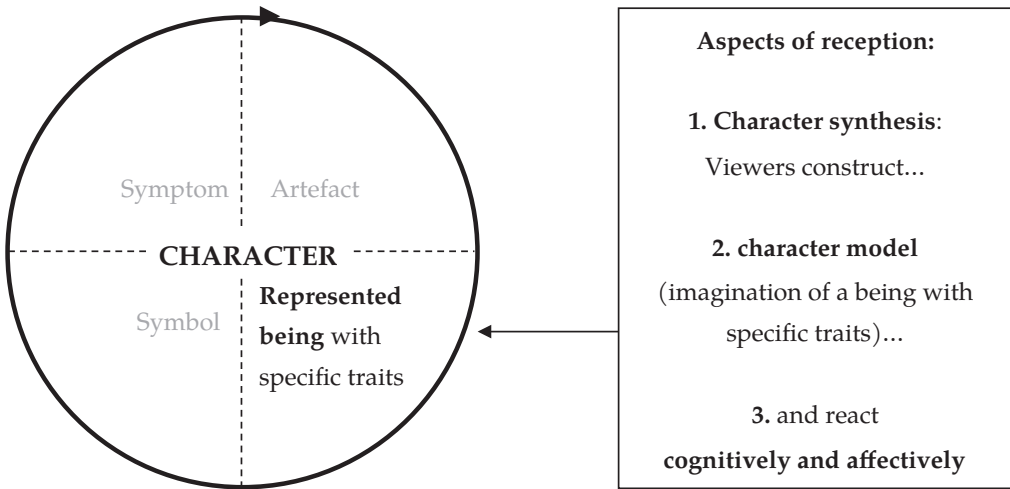


Diagram 7 Reception of characters as represented (fictional) beings

But isn't there an easier answer to all these questions? Don't we simply perceive characters just like real people, ascribe human features to them, identify and interact with them 'parasocially'? I will show that this answer is highly problematic and only seemingly simple. Even the question of how we understand real people or have feelings for them is already difficult to answer, and terms like 'identification' and 'empathy' have proven to be ambiguous and controversial (see Chapter 13). Above all, however, it is not clear to what extent perceiving fictional characters is comparable with perceiving real people. We need to start with the question of reception to determine that.

But why reception, and not the media text, the film? What is to be described here on the basis of reception has traditionally been regarded mostly from the perspective of production or the text, that is as characterisation through 'formal techniques of supplying information' (Pfister) or 'textual indicators' (Rimmon-Kenan).⁷ And

⁶ Murray Smith has looked at this question using the terms 'alignment', 'allegiance', 'sympathy', and 'empathy'; other approaches use concepts such as 'identification', 'sympathy', 'empathy', 'adoption of perspective', 'evaluation', 'appraisal', or '(social) comparison'.

⁷ Rimmon-Kenan (1996: 59–70) examined the techniques used in literature, Pfister (1988: 250–264, here 240) and Fischer-Lichte (1983a) for drama, Dyer (1999: 106–17) and Tomasi (1988: 12–41) for film. Other studies investigated individual aspects such as the face and looking in more detail (e.g., Brinckmann 1997a).

indeed, the means of characterisation are of prime importance for character synthesis (see Part IV). Films are multimodal; they use multiple semiotic and sensory channels to provide information. Characters are portrayed through images, sounds, music, and spoken and written words, and these forms can overlap and reinforce or contradict one another. Various elements of a film contribute to characterisation, provide cues about character traits, and influence how we react. On the formal level of film, there are various devices and techniques including casting, acting, star image, mise-en-scene, staging, decoupage, camerawork, editing, sound design, and music. On the level of what is represented, there are many signs that are just as important means of characterisation, particularly the external appearance of the characters—the body, face, gestures, expressions, clothing, etc., as well as the names, actions, voices, dialogues, situations, objects, visualisation of inner experiences, and narrative commentary. This kind of information can often be understood relatively quickly and easily. It can be used to make inferences about less directly perceptible traits such as thoughts, feelings, personality traits, or social status. Other forms of characterisation are more structural, including the position of the characters within the plot and character constellation, for example in symmetrical or contrasting relations (see Chapter 9 and Chapter 10). Various mechanisms can be combined to produce more complex higher-level patterns. Thus, ‘scenes of empathy’ (Plantinga 1999) reveal a character’s feelings in a particular situation when the camera lingers on their face in long, close shots while the music creates an appropriate mood. Such means and techniques of characterisation will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8. First, however, we have to find out how they ‘function’ at all, why they evoke particular ideas, and that is only possible if we are able to understand their role in reception.

5. Grasping Represented Beings: Forming Mental Models of Characters (T)

The way filmic representation functions is based on specific bodily and mental dispositions of viewers and filmmakers, authors and audiences. It is therefore necessary to look at the reception to understand how characters are depicted and how specific forms of characterisation work (see Chapter 3). This approach enables a more precise description of characters and related experiences, and will provide initial answers to some crucial questions:

- What forms and structures do mental representations of characters (or to be more precise, character models) and the fictional (or factual) beings they represent take on?
- How are character models constructed and developed? To what extent do these processes resemble how we perceive real persons?
- Which filmic features and which dispositions and contexts of the viewers shape the development of character models?
- How are character models related to other mental representations, e.g., of situations or actors?
- Why do viewers create different or similar character models?
- In what ways are character models media specific?
- How do character models change in the course of a film's reception, and how is that significant for the character itself as a final result?

In the following, I shall try to answer these questions. The focus is again on human-like characters in fiction films, but most findings can also be applied to non-fictional characters in documentaries, to characters in other media, and to non-human characters. The first step is to understand how we grasp and imagine characters. A certain degree of abstraction is unavoidable in developing my argumentation. Less theoretically inclined readers can also confine themselves to the simplified overview at the beginning of Chapter 6.

5.1 Character Models and Their Structure

Mental representations of represented beings are products of processes of reception or ‘impression formation’ (Sanders 2010) that involve the interaction of information provided by the film with the viewers’ mental dispositions. The best way to understand this is to start with the result, the mental representation of the character. Even if fictional beings seem to exist right in front of us, they actually only take on life inside in our minds in the form of mental representations. Cognitive theories distinguish between several different kinds of representations, from detailed mental imagery to abstract, sentence-like propositions. The most elaborated theories, however, posit that we comprehend characters by developing *mental models* of them, a kind of an overall impression based on immediate perception, imagery, and propositions, which we integrate and expand on.¹

This requires more precise explanation. Mental models are multimodal, dynamic complexes of mental representations in the working memory and enable both the integration of perceptual impressions and internal simulation processes, fantasy, and imagination (Metzinger 1999: 104–35).² ‘Multimodal’ indicates that different kinds of information—perceptible and abstract, visual, acoustic, haptic, and propositional, among others—is linked in the model (Schneider 2000: 69). This makes sense for the medium of film in particular because the brain processes moving images, sound, language, writing, and music in different ways. Thus, one viewer’s ‘Rick Blaine model’ might combine the visual mental representation of a dark-haired man with acoustic mental representations relating to Bogart’s voice, the sound of the name ‘Rick’, and dialogue (‘Here’s looking at you, kid’), along with assumptions about Rick’s personality traits, his past and his plans, and an understanding of his perceptions and feelings. These varying, interlocking mental representations are assembled into an overall picture of a fictional person named Rick at a certain point in time. Perceptual impressions have a forming influence on such models and their perceived realism. Characters are experienced as either realistic or artificial, depending on whether the film’s stream of audiovisual signs conforms to the brain’s implicit criteria for realism or conflicts with them.³

The concept of mental models is indispensable when the objective is to explain the comprehension of media texts (Zwaan and Radvansky 1998: 163–65). It helps explain the speed at which depicted situations are remembered; the specific ways in which characters are portrayed; the ability to recognise connections between different terms (‘Rick’ and ‘Mr. Blaine’); the abilities to link visual and linguistic information (e.g.,

1 See, for example, Schneider 2000; Jannidis 2004. However, Schneider does not differentiate between character and character model (2000, 405). For more on the concept of the mental model, see Johnson-Laird 1983, 1989; Zwaan and Radvansky 1998; Metzinger 1999, Chapter 2.

2 Here and later, I’m quoting from Metzinger’s German-language original; a new English-language edition is Metzinger 2003.

3 For more on assessment of the reality status, see, for example, Grodal 2006: 7–8 (Grodal does not speak of mental models, but his basic ideas are compatible).

the name 'Rick' and the picture on a poster), to recognise a character in various media texts, and to translate their stories into other languages or semiotic systems. In other words, there are excellent empirical reasons for adopting the concept of mental models. In our context, it will prove to be an extremely useful tool for purposes of analysis.

Literary scholar Ralf Schneider (2000) has developed the most comprehensive work on character models so far. He sums up their characteristic features as follows (2000: 80): character models are complex because they integrate a wide variety of information. They are flexible in the sense that parts of them can enter the foreground or background of consciousness, thereby focusing the viewer's attention on relevant aspects. They are dynamic, being constantly updated, elaborated, modified, or revised on the basis of new information. And they exist within an interactive context: viewers link and compare various character models. One can add that character models are presumably linked to other mental representations, particularly models of the represented situations⁴ the character is in, the communicative context⁵ in which the character is perceived (such as a screening in a cinema), and the particular self-model of the viewers.⁶ Furthermore, the phenomenon of constructing mental models is not limited to fictional characters and worlds, but instead represents an essential form of everyday imagination, memory, and planning, even our entire experience of the world around us, other people, and ourselves (see Metzinger 1999; 2004). Compared to the information provided by the real or mediated environment, mental models are always simplified and selective, not least because of the limited capacities of the human mind. Not all character-related information provided in a film sequence is integrated into the mental model. This is made quite clear by phenomena such as the abovementioned inattentional blindness (see Chapter 3) or when viewers miss hints concerning a crime's motive that seem obvious in retrospect.

As a heuristic instrument, the concept of mental models invites us to consider which mental representations the viewers are likely to develop during the various phases of a film. Mental models change over time: 'While schemata are data structures stored in the memory that can be activated, mental models represent the dynamic use of such structures while newly arriving information is being processed' (Schneider 2000: 62). Such temporary complexes of mental representations, termed '*current models*' by the psychologists Zwaan and Radvansky,⁷ can also be compiled and stored in memory. A temporal series of current models are combined into a comprehensive 'integrated model' of the character, such as by drawing conclusions about essential characteristics from discrete traits that are shown in various moments or situations. Even if the character is not visible or audible at that moment, mental representations relating to

4 Situation models represent the focus in investigations of mental models; see, for example, Ohler 1994; Zwaan and Radvansky 1998.

5 For more on context models of discourse, see van Dijk 1997.

6 Metzinger (1999; 2003) assumes that humans' subjectivity and self-confidence exist in the form of a self-model.

7 Below, I apply Zwaan and Radvansky's approach, developed in relation to literature and situations (1998: 165–66) to film characters.

their appearance and characteristics are present in the conscious background and can be activated by the film and called up in a test. For example, one could stop the film at a certain point and ask the viewer to paint a picture of Rick or inquire what they know about him. At the film's end, the viewer has a 'complete model' of the character which is stored in the long-term memory. This complete model can be referred to during subsequent discussion and further elaborated. In short, viewers first construct current models while taking in certain bits of information and compile them into integrated models in the course of the film, then have a complete model at the film's end. Like the tip of an iceberg, the current model is a present and conscious element in the working memory, while the more comprehensive integrated, or complete, model is 'below the surface' in the long-term memory. During meta-communication, the character can then be turned into an intersubjective object by considering which complete model would be ideal in normative abstraction and mutual discussion.

This way of examining the character on the basis of reception differs considerably from approaches that focus only on text. Structuralist theories regard characters as bundles of stable characteristics that are compiled in succession when reading a literary work or watching a film,⁸ and they do not say anything of note about their internal structure. According to them, readers or viewers grasp characters by comprehending text passages, adding new elements to a list of characteristics on that basis, and successively filling the character's 'empty' name with semantic content.⁹ In this view, reception is closely bound to explicit representations in the text and resembles a puzzle in which a picture of the character is formed piece by piece.

In contrast, the character model is more similar to a painting drafted as a complete sketch as quickly as possible and then turned into a finished product. Marginal clues provided in the film are often sufficient for this sketch. The informational content of the initial mental representation of the character differs from what is explicitly depicted because, on the one hand, not all the information that is provided is actually processed, and on the other hand, it may be complemented by memories, inferences, and suppositions. Frequently, the viewer already has a hypothetical character model before the film begins, obtained from conversations, posters, or reviews. Further development of the mental representation of the character does not progress in a linear, additive manner but in leaps and bounds dependent on the interaction of textual information and mental dispositions. Above all, the character is not a sum total of traits, but possesses a specific *system* of traits, which is more than the sum of its parts. The traits are not the characters themselves, and they are linked together rather than discrete. The nature of this connection could be seen by visualising the character model's structure in the analysis. Three additional questions arise as a result:

8 Chatman terms the character a 'paradigm of traits' (1978: 126ff.), while Barthes calls it a 'collection of semes' (1974: 191). Pfister understands the character's 'character' or 'identity' as the 'sum of the correspondence and contrast relationships to the other characters in the text' (1988: 224).

9 See Barthes 1974: 190ff. and the overview in Koch 1991: 233.

- What kinds of traits are represented in character models?
- How are these traits related to each other, what is the model's internal structure?
- How is the model related to other mental representations?

These questions have not yet been discussed in detail. In accordance with the general use of the term, I assume that the character model consists of mental representations of the represented being's traits. These traits are interconnected and form a system that positions the individual character in the storyworld and especially within the constellation of characters. In contrast, the properties of the character as a symbol, symptom, or artefact are not part of the character model itself but are closely linked to it.¹⁰

Traits of Represented Beings

Our definition of what characters are (in Chapter 3) already provides a very general structure of the system of traits presented in the complete character model: they are recognisable represented beings with an inner life, or to be more precise, they are capable of intentionality, of mental relations to objects of thought and experience. Accordingly, their constellation of traits must be so specific that they can—in some way—be recognised and distinguished from other beings in the represented world. Moreover, they must be able to have object-related internal processes, such as perceptions or emotions.

The range of more concrete characteristics that can satisfy this general requirement is nearly endless. Language is one indication of this: in English dictionaries, nearly 18,000 different terms for human personality traits have been recorded (Asendorpf 2005: 146). The features of represented (and especially fictional) beings, however, go beyond the realm of human existence, call its limits into question, and also comprise everything that can be said about animals, robots, or all kinds of fantastic figures. In the following, I focus on the most common and complex case: characters that are human-like in central respects, especially their psyche and sociality, which includes anthropomorphised animals, deities, and fantasy beings. I by no means want to rule out the possibility that characters are testing the limits of the human, or that non-human characters are also formed on the basis of other dispositions, bodies of knowledge, and systems of imagination (such as folk biology or specific religious beliefs). Even then, however, most of the central categories and processes, which are described below based on the standard case of human-like characters, remain valid.

A number of attempts have been made to organise the enormous field of human traits into categories so as to make them more manageable and facilitate character analysis. Seger's concept of characters is one example. She emphasises traits from the

10 This aspect has not yet been clarified in its entirety, but the term 'mental model' is normally used solely with regard to the level of what is being depicted.

area of the psyche and personality, and treats appearance, environment, back story, and social relations as additional categories. Similar catalogues of traits were already employed in ancient rhetoric for the purpose of developing person-related arguments; Cicero's writings on rhetoric, for example, considered physical constitution, genealogy, biography, activities, acquired mental and physical traits, and temporary states. Thomas Koch compiled a number of such 'thematologies for depicting humans' (1991: 16–20). Such overviews of characteristics can be useful in several ways:

- They outline a background of fundamental possibilities, against which the individual character stands out, thus making it easier to recognise their specific features. As a result, they can be used as a way to point out the traits of individual characters systematically and discover new aspects about them.
- They can, in a way similar to ancient rhetoric, provide inspiration for new ideas in the development of characters or show which aspects are underdeveloped and need reworking in a script.¹¹
- They indicate the film's general themes and facilitate recognition of 'which elements, aspects or dimensions of the human individual or human existence' (Koch 1991: 18) play a role in the film.
- They make it possible to compare characters from different cultures, eras, genres, oeuvres, etc. more specifically and determine their characteristic features: Which traits are particularly marked in their case?
- They also tend to reveal universal tendencies of character construction, such as the cross-cultural preference for active characters that have a concrete objective.

Thus, systematic overviews of traits are a very useful tool in analysing represented beings (and can possibly aid in understanding real people). A good foundation for this purpose is provided by literary scholar Thomas Koch (1991) and playwright Lajos Egri (1960: 32–43). After evaluating numerous catalogues of features, Koch differentiates between the character's physical, psychic, and external aspects, their activities, and their biography (1991: 283). As part of practical dramaturgy, a partially congruous categorisation has proven its usefulness for decades: Egri's classic, *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (1960), which Seger also employs for her system, distinguishes between characters' physiology, psychology, and sociology—in other words, their physical, mental, and social traits. This division is central to Egri's dramaturgical approach. During the creative process, scriptwriters should shape the combination of

11 This is a widespread practice in story development. Many script manuals contain checklists of traits that screenwriters should be familiar with for their characters. During imagination exercises in screenwriting workshops, participants are asked to form a detailed mental representation of their character so that it can be described in a more precise, original, and plausible way.

the characters' traits precisely, so that it necessarily leads to their actions and conflicts. In Egri's view, Rick would not have been capable of doing anything other than letting Ilsa and her husband go because of his love and moral principles, and a conflict with the Nazi Strasser was therefore inevitable.

A certain standard of classic narrative and psychological credibility can be found behind this production-related approach, but Egri's overview is significant in our context for different reasons. He strives, quite successfully, to capture the most important dimensions of human traits. His division into physical, psychological, and social traits corresponds not only to Koch's and Seger's central categories, they can also be explained systematically. The differentiation between physical constitution and psyche, body and mind represents a central basis of our thought and speech. In the field of philosophy, the mind-body problem has been discussed for millennia.¹² The body can be localised and perceived in terms of time and space, and it also possesses size and mass. However, this does not apply to mental processes. In fiction, however, it is even possible to eliminate this fundamental separation. The horror genre contains mindless bodies and disembodied spirits. Still, such exploration of dividing lines can only be described in terms of body and mind. Therefore, it makes sense to take the basic differentiation between physical and psychological traits into account in character analysis.

This differentiation involves the individual character, which, however, normally belongs to a network of relationships and interacts with other characters. Describing this aspect requires additional categories of the *social* that position the character within intersubjective relationships, actions, and structures. In social categories—such as that of a conflict or a romantic relationship—physical and mental aspects are inextricably linked in forming a third area of traits in addition to body and psyche.¹³ In philosophical anthropology, this separation into three categories is known as the 'outer world', 'inner world', and 'shared world' (*Mitwelt*; see Plessner 1982). They are, however, not limited to humans and can also be attributed to many non-human beings.

Thus, Egri's intuitive division into 'physiology, sociology, and psychology' has a surprisingly solid theoretical foundation. It provides a useful overview of the relatively stable traits and dispositions of characters,¹⁴ though it can also be systematically complemented to create a more comprehensive overview of character traits. Above all, fleeting features, in other words temporary physical states, experiences, and social circumstances, can be added in all three areas. Furthermore, additional distinctions can

12 Even when materialistic positions prove to be correct in explaining psychological processes on the basis of physical ones, the fact remains that we think and speak about them in different ways.

13 It is presumably not a coincidence that the human sciences can also be roughly categorised in a similar way involving the body (anatomy), the consciousness (psychology) and social structures (sociology) if they do not examine all three areas in a single context (philosophy, cultural studies, etc.).

14 'A disposition is a person's characteristic trait that demonstrates a medium-term temporal stability, i.e. lasting weeks or months at least. A disposition makes a person prone to exhibit a certain behaviour in certain situations' (Asendorpf 2005: 4; see also 6). A character's relatively constant traits can also change over the course of a story: in *The Fly*, the attractive scientist Seth Brundle transforms into the repulsive Brundlefly. In such cases, identity can be grasped in terms of continuity only.

be made between traits in a narrower sense, i.e., those that a being itself possesses, and its external relationships with other beings or objects. Both can be either perceptible or not directly perceptible. The following overview, which was inspired by Egri's and Koch's work, contains examples of this division. However, it is important to keep in mind that the following distinctions should not be misunderstood as rigid, essentialist concepts, but as flexible heuristic tools. The categories overlap and are closely interrelated in fluid synergies of behaviour, representation, and reception (see below), and many of the traits they assemble can be understood as socially constructed or results of performative processes under certain societal conditions (e.g., bodies are shaped and gender is performed according to certain social norms). Nevertheless, the following categories are indispensable for identifying and naming focal points of traits ascribed to characters (as well as real persons).

1. Physical (or corporeal) traits involve the body, are material, and can, in most cases, be perceived directly. According to Egri, the stable physical features include age, sex, height and weight, hair, eye and skin colour, outward appearance (level of attractiveness and grooming), and physical abilities and defects (abnormalities, illnesses). Other aspects are spatial relationships (e.g., geographical location) and fleeting traits, such as external actions, body movements, and physical states such as injuries and blushing.
2. Psychological (or mental) traits involve the character's personality and subjective experience. They are neither material nor directly perceptible.¹⁵ The constant personality dispositions include, for example, moral principles, disappointments, temperament (choleric, pessimistic, optimistic), general attitude toward life (obsessive, resigned, curious, negative), complexes, obsessions, fears and anxieties, boundaries, beliefs, contact behaviour (extroverted, introverted), mental abilities (languages, imagination, taste, composure), intelligence, and habits. The fleeting mental experiences include perception, thought, feeling, memory, or dreams.
3. Social traits and relationships have both physical and psychological aspects and relate to the character's position and interaction in intersubjective contexts, in other words, their relations with other characters, social groups and institutions. Examples of stable social traits are socioeconomic class (upper, middle, or lower), employment (type of job, working hours, income, working conditions), education, family background (parents' life and job, relationship with them), marital status, religion, nationality, place in the community (status, group membership), political preferences, level of engagement, leisure-time activities, and sex life. The fleeting traits constitute interactions with other characters and temporary social situations, including all forms of verbal and nonverbal communication, conflicts, joint activities, etc.

15 Psychological relationships must be described using the phenomenon of intentionality, of mental object-relatedness.

These traits are, of course, interconnected, and can be arranged temporally in terms of the character's past, present, or future. Mental representations relating to the present are normally foregrounded in character models. On the other hand, they also contain expectations for the future, and the character's past is frequently employed to explain personality and behaviour. A character's backstory and expectations for the future anchor it in the plot. This narrative context normally comprises the social interaction of thinking and feeling beings that experience the action from a certain perspective. Physical, psychological, and social aspects are closely related, and for this reason, inner processes often involve social relationships ('Does she love me?') and give rise to social interactions.

The relationships among physicality, psyche, and sociality within a character's *behaviour* are so complex that it makes sense to deal with it as a fourth area in the heuristic.¹⁶ As a rule, physical, externally observable behaviour results from psychological causes or reasons and also frequently has social functions. Intentions underlie actions, and descriptions of them are more informative the more explicitly they identify psychological motives and social contexts of external actions: 'He scratched himself' (physical action) 'out of embarrassment' (psychological reason) 'because he had made a fool of himself' (social cause) (see Persson 2003: 149–59). Particularly important areas of behaviour are a character's bodily interactions with the material environment, as well as communication between characters in the form of speech, gestures, facial expressions, etc. that make feelings and thoughts externally perceptible. In conversations and collective actions, the participants and their thoughts and actions are related to one another.¹⁷ Alan Palmer even assumes that the characters' intertwined consciousnesses, their 'social mind in action', represents the decisive core of every story (2004).

The simple but comprehensive division of character traits into physicality (or corporeality; *Körperlichkeit*), psyche (mind), sociality, and behaviour largely corresponds to several alternative category systems and can integrate them.¹⁸ Moreover, it can be systematically extended, as Chapter 6 and Chapter 9 will show. The open, flexible

16 This is how Koch (1991) deals with the category of 'activities'. For more on this theme, see also Doležel 1998: Chapter 2; he provides an informative overview of the philosophical action theory.

17 At times, one could almost speak of outsourcing of thought processes: conversational partners help think for me, and the gradual completion of thoughts is a joint activity.

18 Uri Margolin distinguishes between 'four basic mimetic dimensions: the physical, behavioral, mental, and locutionary' (1995: 386), while Lubomír Doležel (1998: 34–35) distinguishes between static and dynamic motifs (constant and fleeting traits). The former comprise physical and mental states and relationships, dynamic motives in natural events, physical actions, social interactions, and mental and communicative acts. Dario Tomasi (1988, 42) distinguishes between the character's 'being' (*essere*) and its 'appearing' (*apparire*), and also between the character's actions (*fare*), which include speech (*dire*) and sight (*vedere*), and the modalities of wanting (*volere*), knowing (*sapere*), and ability (*potere*). Tomasi apparently applies 'being' to the constant traits, while 'appearing' refers to how the characters seem to both other characters and the viewer (see 1988: 51–62). Elsewhere in his work, he distinguishes between social traits (*statuto anagrafico*: name, gender, age, social and family status), character traits (psyche, emotions, sensitivities), values (philosophy of life, ideology, beliefs, existential problems), and modalities (wanting, knowledge, abilities; Tomasi 1988: 45).

heuristic has been tested extensively in practical analyses and has proven that it can be useful in making the specific structures of character models and represented beings visible. It also clarifies that grasping a character's traits is a process that involves a number of steps. One possibility is that viewers use the known traits in one area—body, psyche, sociality, behaviour—to draw conclusions about all kinds of other characteristics. Normally, such inferences are related mainly to external characteristics and behavioural patterns. But viewers can also imagine a character's body, even if it is not shown, on the basis of personality traits that are mentioned in a dialogue. While the various kinds of characteristics are interrelated through such inferences, they tend to work more strongly in certain directions: conclusions about the psyche on the basis of the body, about inner motivations on the basis of external actions, about permanent personality dispositions on the basis of situational mental processes, and about social positions on the basis of external interactions (see Diagram 8).

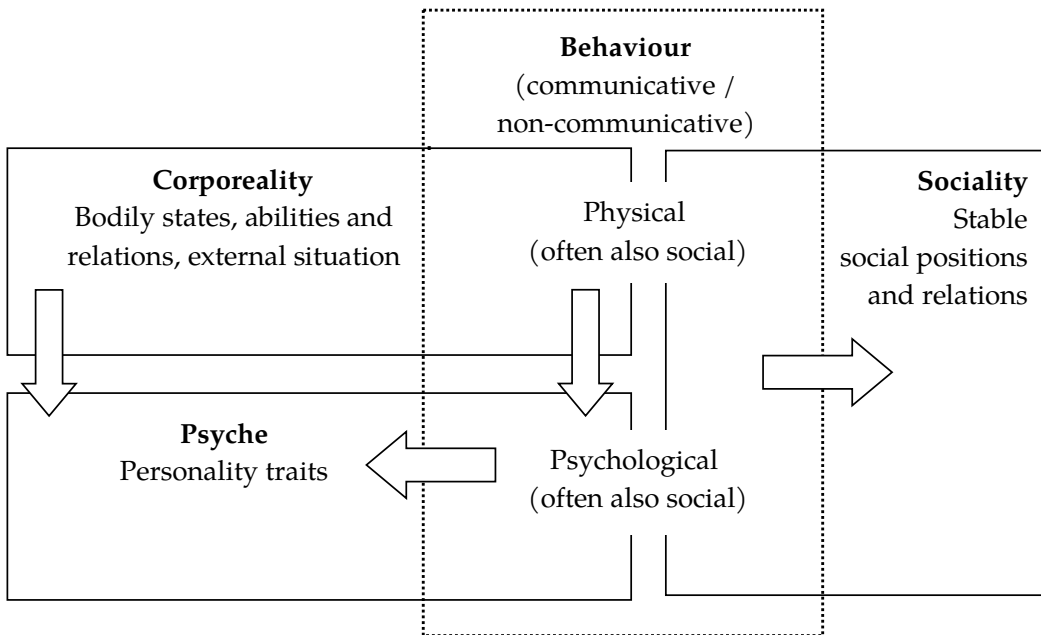


Diagram 8 Corporeality, psyche, sociality, and behaviour as general trait dimensions of represented beings and the main directions of inferring them during reception

While it might seem obvious to draw conclusions about motives, emotional states, social positions, or character traits based on external actions or facial expressions, in reality it is a complex process, and different viewers often come up with different results. Conclusions concerning psychological and social traits in particular are usually provisional, dependent on context, ambivalent, and probabilistic (see below and Margolin 1986: 206–207).

An Example: The Exposition of Rick Blaine in *Casablanca*

The diagram and the division into dimensions are intended to support the heuristic, not to make it seem as if the reception and analysis of characters is a schematic process of assigning traits. Constructing character models is a sensual and perceptual, dynamic, and affective experience. The example of Rick Blaine might illustrate this. The first thing viewers learn about Rick is his social position. His name, the casual, energetic short form of Richard, is the initial identifying factor; long before we see Rick, his social status and role are established, and the language, the locations, and the behaviour of other characters all contribute to this. *Casablanca* is a dangerous place. A search is on for the murderer of two German couriers, and the police shoot someone who is trying to escape. An airplane lands behind the sign for Rick's Café Américain, and the film's villain, Nazi Major Strasser, gets off. He immediately learns from his host, Captain Renault, that the murderer will be at the nightclub, because 'Everybody comes to Rick's'. At night, the watering hole is depicted as a glamorous, labyrinthine microcosm, perfect for hatching conspiracies, where Rick rules. The behaviour of his employees—the barkeeper, waiter, croupier, and piano player—demonstrates their loyalty to him. The guests want to spend time with Rick and beautiful women desire him, but he has his employees brush them all off. Put briefly, Rick is the focus of attention. Everyone likes, admires, or respects him. He, on the other hand, is extremely withdrawn. Before Rick is seen or heard, his social status makes viewers expect certain psychological traits: a commanding personality characterised by self-confidence, self-assertiveness, strong leadership skills, intelligence, vigour, aloofness, etc. Such assumptions draw even more attention to the gaps in the character model, resulting in curiosity that lasts until the assumed personality traits are confirmed and deepened by finally seeing Rick and his first actions (Figure 7).

In other words, Rick's introduction foregrounds his social position and arouses the viewer's curiosity about his physical and psychological traits. In this case, sociality and psyche are closely linked with each other and with values and emotions. The scene's tension continues throughout the development of Rick's body image. At first, we only see his hand, which fills the picture while he signs a check with a flourish. After a brief pause, the camera pans diagonally from the lower left right to his face and then moves backward slightly to show his torso in full. This view permits an initial evaluation of his appearance, age, attractiveness, and first personality traits. Rick seems sensitive, experienced, virile, and calm. His minimal external actions already characterise him: his signature and the chess game he plays by himself suggest resoluteness, intelligence, introversion, and enjoyment of strategic thought; smoking and drinking alcohol are cultural signs of male toughness, abundant life experience, and the ability to experience pleasure. From where he sits, Rick has a view of the entrance and doorman; new arrivals eye him questioningly, and with a nod, he indicates whether they are to be let in. In other words, Rick's first interactions underline the fact that he enjoys a position of power in which he can make decisions. He handles the first

conflict with ease, turning away a high-ranking Nazi. Rick's elegant clothing and virile appearance, his calm, deep, and somewhat nasal voice and his cool body language reinforce an impression of traits that are considered positive, such as independence, taste, self-discipline, determination, and self-confidence. Furthermore, his disdain for Nazis is made obvious. His facial expressions and manner of speaking suggest a basic emotional attitude of coolness mixed with bitterness and irony.

The shots that follow show a frontal view of Rick standing at a distance. His bright white dinner jacket makes him stand out, and he seems to be taller than his interlocutor Ugarte. Throughout Rick's dialogue with Ugarte, who fawns over him and reveals himself to be the murderer, and later during conversations with Captain Renault, additional conspicuous gaps in the character model are created. Despite his cynical remarks, Rick is addressed as a moral authority. He is accused of being sentimental and evades questions about his eventful past. Groupings, analogies, contrasts, repetitions, and associated metaphors are conspicuous elements in the way his relationships with other characters are shown. For example, Rick's self-confident taciturnity contrasts with Ugarte's submissive chatter and he repeatedly detaches himself from situations involving others (guests, Yvonne, Renault, Strasser, and Ugarte); and in the later scene in which 'La Marseillaise' is sung, he stands with Victor Laszlo in opposition to the Nazis.

The model of Rick's character is developed further as the film progresses. Particularly his relationship with Ilsa and the moral conflicts it involves are foregrounded. At the same time, Rick's motives are often ambivalent. He desires Ilsa and wants her back, and at the same time wants to help her escape, overcome his emotional pain, maintain his moral integrity, and get away from the Nazis. The characters' social actions are intermixed with their thoughts, feelings, desires, and plans, in which they relate to one another. For example, Rick's escape plan at the film's end is intended to fool Renault and Ilsa and anticipates their expectations.

A large amount of information leads to a model of Rick's inner life, his personality, his actions and motives, social position, and interactions. This model is, however, to a large extent one that cannot easily be explicitly formulated. Trying to describe it makes some difficulties evident. It is only possible to name a few of the character's stable traits, and even they often remain uncertain or disputed:

- **Sociality:** Rick is a well-to-do, single nightclub owner from the United States, enjoys a high degree of status in Casablanca, and his past is eventful and includes an unhappy romance with Ilsa. His ethnic origin, religion and other characteristics are not quite clear or remain open.
- **Physicality:** Rick is a healthy, good-looking man of about forty, medium height with dark hair and eyes. But how, for example, can the subtle details of his face and the shape of his body be described?
- **Psyche:** Rick seems to be intelligent, self-confident and an introvert, with a tendency to become sentimental, and apparently changes from a resigned

cynic to an idealist. The focus of the story is on his romantic difficulties, his integrity, and his moral development. There is probably less consensus concerning whether he pities himself, or whether he is moralistic, calculating, sensitive, or has good taste.

In describing a character, fleeting processes are condensed even more strongly than such stable features. Rick's externally perceptible behaviour includes his calm movements, how he walks through his nightclub, and his changing positions in this space and in relation to other characters. In the area of mental processes, his feelings for Ilsa, his memories of their past in Paris, and his plans to save her and Laszlo are foregrounded. Rick's social interactions represent the essential element of the film's plot. He confronts Ilsa with his pain and induces her to declare her love for him; he helps Victor Laszlo, stands in opposition to the Nazis, shoots Strasser, and becomes friends with Captain Renault.

Hopefully, this example makes the sense of the suggested heuristic clear, in addition to certain questions regarding its application. Implicit conclusions, assessments, and processes of condensation and selection play a role when grasping a character's traits and verbalising them can pose some difficulties. Wholly different views of Rick are also possible. He could be considered arrogant, uncouth, sexist, racist, and conceited; his nasal voice, stiff posture, and stone face could be seen as annoying; the flat back of his head might arouse pity; or one could have the impression that he does not truly love Ilsa and that the other characters make an unnecessary fuss over him. The fact that such judgements are debatable proves they are neither simple nor purely subjective and arbitrary. The question is how such varying mental representations of a character can be reached and supported or argued against.

This example points to a few basic structures of character models. It shows that the various kinds of traits have varying degrees of clarity and relevance (for the viewers and within the film's depiction). Traits have different levels of importance, certainty, and explicitness in the model. The means of characterisation plays a central role in this: by whom, when, where, how often, how long, and how intensively it is shown, stated, or suggested that the character possesses a certain trait. But the viewers' mental assumptions also influence the comprehension of traits as well as the importance attached to them. Particularly conspicuous are those characteristics linked with strong values and affects, such as beauty and power, morals, social groups and roles, or a character's most important motives, which drive the story and provide an essential foundation for emotional sympathy and inferences about themes. Particularly striking traits can draw attention away from more subtle details, and even characters that possess a wide variety of them can seem one-dimensional.

However, each character model is selective and involves 'gaps' and 'indeterminacy' (Iser 1978), so that one is given little or no concrete information about some aspects of a character, such as what prevents Rick from returning to the United States. That certain characteristics remain vague influences the affective involvement with characters and their ideological effects. Some gaps are conspicuously accentuated, raise questions, and arouse

curiosity, e.g., about why Rick's reaction to Ilsa's arrival is so extreme, and what experiences the two share. In such cases, characters sometimes seem enigmatic, for instance in regard to their motives, and viewers search for clues to round out their character model. What these clues are, and what we would like to learn about the character, depends on various factors, including the genre and the film's theme, the problem the character faces, situational circumstances that make a certain trait seem relevant, relationships with other characters, etc. Whenever something about the character seems puzzling, attention is focused on this aspect, which is seen as a gap in information. In other cases, traits are left out in a subtle way, sometimes with ideological consequences. What does it mean when work, class relations, or politics play only a marginal role in a society's films, when there is only little information about certain social groups, or when depictions of women focus exclusively on beauty, family, or sexuality? Such social taboos and stereotypes can be revealed more easily based on an overview of characters' traits.

The system of traits within a character model is not only selective and attaches a different amount of importance to various elements, it is also more or less consistent in that a character's traits fit together or do not, that their combination corresponds with certain everyday experiences and (psycho)logical probabilities or not. Opinions can vary here, too. Is it consistent that sensitive Rick treats his former lover Yvonne so cruelly? Or that, despite his intelligence and wealth of life experience, he is unable to get over his brief romance with Ilsa?

We can now summarise the following provisional conclusions: viewers grasp represented beings in the form of mental character models that change in the course of a film. Character models represent a dynamic system comprising more or less vivid mental representations concerning a character's physical, psychological, and social traits, their stable features and fleeting states and behaviours at a certain point in time. This system of characteristics can be more or less complex and consistent, though it is, at the very least, specific enough for the character to be recognisable in the represented world. Their traits are presented with varying degrees of intensity, ambiguity, and certainty, and certain features are marginalised or foregrounded. In many cases, various traits are grouped around a kind of core personality. At the same time, the system of traits is always selective and has gaps, and is sometimes even noticeably incomplete. It stimulates a desire to get more information from the narrative and triggers curiosity and suspense.

An attempt to communicate mental representations of a character to someone else involves the difficulty of verbalising a complex, to some extent ambivalent and prelinguistic character model in a condensed form. What is the basis for attributing certain traits, particularly when they are suggested indirectly rather than depicted directly? Where does purely subjective speculation begin? The following paragraphs turn to these questions. To answer them, we need to take a closer look at how viewers comprehend characters when watching a film and which factors play a role in the construction of a character model (see Diagram 9). Building on that, Chapter 6 will go into more detail on characters' physical, psychological, and social traits and behaviours.

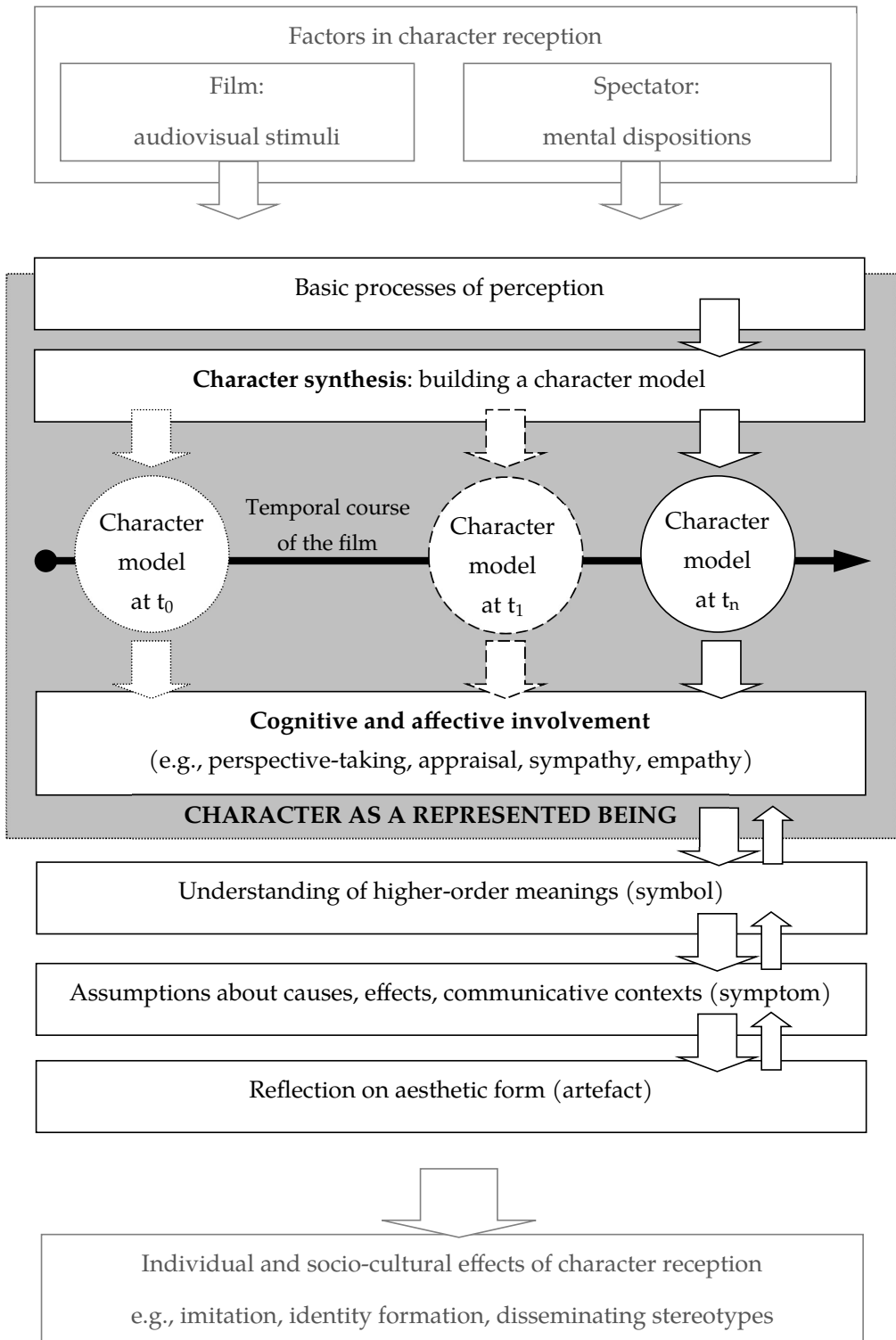


Diagram 9 Character synthesis and its position in the context of reception

Processes in Character Synthesis

Before character synthesis is examined in detail, it is helpful to gain an overview (see Diagram 9).¹⁹ In general, we construct character models by using our mental dispositions, assumptions, and knowledge while processing information provided by a film. As we have seen thus far, viewers first take in information in the form of sounds and moving images while watching the film. A wide range of audiovisual information plays a role here. It includes faces, voices, noises, and body images of actors as well as movement patterns, subjective points of view, and all forms that are even remotely similar to humans or (other) animals, e.g., in experimental or animation film. Even a minimal resemblance—such as a smiley face—is sufficient to let us imagine a thinking, feeling being. When objects seem to move toward a specific objective, they are attributed intentionality. Language is another central factor, appearing in the form of dialogue, voice-overs, text inserts, intertitles, and lyrics. Names such as ‘Rick’, characterisations such as ‘owner of the nightclub’, pronouns such as ‘he’, verbs such as ‘think’ or ‘walk’, trigger rudimentary mental representations of a conscious being. The same can be said for everything caused by this entity (e.g., the shark’s tooth marks in *Jaws*), particularly for objects and environments created by humans. All this information can be employed in constructing a character model.

Getting character synthesis started first requires directing one’s attention toward the character-related information, and there is a natural tendency to do so. Social behaviour is essential for human survival: learning processes, reproduction, identity formation, acknowledgement, defending oneself, helping one another, all require attention to social matters. Children pay attention to others from the very beginning of their lives. Anthropoid forms exercise an immediate attraction in media texts for this very reason. ‘Humans are predisposed, biologically and culturally, to attend to human-like agents in representations. The character-as-person schema seems obvious because it is ours; it is us’ (Bordwell 1989: 153). The fact that characters are usually *moving* objects in a static environment is another reason to take note of them. That we are naturally and culturally predisposed to pay attention to characters is further supported by a film’s form in a number of ways. Voices are filtered from the ambient sounds, bodies are centred in the frame and accentuated by the lighting, and cameras show faces in close-up.

In order to process this information—which a film presents as means of characterisation—viewers rely on mental prerequisites, which include their knowledge about people, lovers, idealists, etc. These assumptions are conceived differently by various theories: as codes, frames, horizons, memory content, folk theories, reaction

19 See also Ralf Schneider’s diagram on constructing models of literary characters (2000: 170), Marisa Bortolussi’s and Peter Dixon’s suggestion to explain character synthesis on the basis of Bayesian models of probability (2003: 133–65), and Meghan Sanders’s model of ‘character impression formation’ (2010: 157).

patterns, mental programs, terms, categories, schemata, exempla, prototypes, stereotypes, or archetypes. I bundle these concepts under the term 'mental dispositions', following Persson (2003) and the established terminology of the philosophy of mind. Innate and acquired dispositions interact; they can be joined to form 'semantic networks' and are activated by the same information or by each other. At the same time, they are embedded in the more comprehensive 'associative network' that the film generates in the course of its reception (see Stroebe, Hewstone, and Stephenson 1996: 123; Grodal 1999: 62–77). Thus, our consciousness does not resemble an empty screen on which the film projects its image of the character. Instead, it resembles the hands of a sculptor who shapes the character out of some material. Mental dispositions guide our attention, influence selection, assignment of importance, and storage of information, and enable us to close informational gaps and go beyond what is conveyed explicitly. For example, at the end of *Casablanca*, the viewer can still hope, against all appearances, that Rick will not turn in his rival, Victor Laszlo, to the Nazis because he is too decent. Character reception therefore takes place as an interaction between information provided by the film and the viewer's mental dispositions, and thus between bottom-up and top-down processes (that is why the model has arrows in both directions). For instance, persons of colour can be stereotyped bottom-up, based solely on the perception of their skin tone, or they can be stereotyped top-down, based on contextual information about their social status (e.g., from the film's trailer), or the viewers' knowledge of the actor's previous roles and the filmmakers' intentions. While character synthesis is a bidirectional, bottom-up-top-down process, it is still important that viewers' cognitive and affective experiences develop across several different levels: from preconscious perception of audiovisual character depictions to the construction of mental character models to further inferences concerning their indirect meanings and connections to reality.

When characters are regarded as represented beings, this focuses on the level of mental model construction (highlighted in grey in the diagram). The mental character model is at the centre of reception processes. This is a more or less clear mental representation of this entity and its characteristics. Guided by the film's acoustic and visual stimuli, viewers (re)construct the represented being and visualise its external features, personality, network of relationships, etc. A large part of this is the preconscious, but active process in which viewers work on a character model by identifying, observing, categorising, assessing, assigning attributes and traits, and drawing conclusions. The represented being is never shown to or heard by viewers directly, but solely in the form of audiovisual signs, on the basis of which a representation of the character must be formed. That this is quite a complex process and that it can fail is demonstrated by experimental films such as *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*/*Last Year at Marienbad*, in which no coherent beings can be constructed, since the information the film provides is too contradictory.

In the course of a film, the character model changes as a result of additional

information being processed.²⁰ New traits are integrated into the model; others are modified, reassigned importance, rejected, or forgotten. Strictly speaking, a time index must therefore be added to the character model (model in $t_0, t_1 \dots t_n$). Our mental representation of Rick at the film's beginning differs from the one at the film's middle or end. Moreover, the character model is embedded in more general models of situations, spaces, actions, themes, and other contexts. Viewers do not simply imagine Rick alone, but in a certain environment, in a certain position, in relation to others.

Character synthesis represents the foundation for processes of cognitive and affective involvement with the character. The character model then becomes part of certain mental representations, thoughts, and feelings that relate to the being and therefore its experiences. The viewer feels close to Rick or far from him, understands him or does not, admires him or regards him with a sense of irony. Terms such as empathy, sympathy, or perspective-taking are often employed to discuss these processes.

Character synthesis and the imaginative, affective involvement with represented beings should not be examined separately, as they are embedded in additional levels of reception. They represent the basis for the inference of higher meanings (Rick as a symbol), for conclusions about communicative contexts (Rick as a symptom), and for aesthetic reflection (Rick as an artefact), and they are also influenced by these higher-level reception processes (Rick's symbolism and filmic form suggest that he was intended to be understood in a certain way).

On the basis of the overall context of character reception, long-term effects on the viewers (the bottom level in the diagram), their self-concept, and their behaviour can result from additional processing, consideration, and conversations after watching the film. The fictional individual Rick is stored in the viewer's memory and may become a model for imitation.

Diagram 9 illustrates how character models and processes of character reception depend for the most part on two factors: firstly, the specific constellation of audiovisual information provided by the film, and secondly, the viewer's bodily and mental dispositions. Representational techniques and structures are dealt with in more detail in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 on the character as an artefact. However, the backdrop before which they operate must be determined first. In the chapter on reception, a few fundamentals were outlined, and I would like to recall some important points here:

- Humans have limited capacities for processing information and use fast, intuitive, affective, biased thinking whenever possible (as psychological research has unequivocally shown; see Kahneman 2011). When perceiving other beings, they mostly proceed economically, attempting to minimise the effort involved, and employ rules of thumb that simplify the task. This fact is even more relevant in relation to moviegoers, because the film presents them with a fixed time scheme.

20 See Schneider 2000; Ohler 1994; Culpeper 2000; Gerrig 1993; Grabes 1978.

- Humans usually have certain motives or pursue certain interests when they perceive others. It is possible that they see characters in a certain way because they *want* to.
- Humans possess dispositions and bodies of knowledge that enable them to make assessments that simplify the situation and go beyond the information provided. Such dispositions influence opinions, memories, and expectations, and represent a network of associations. For this reason, individual observations can trigger additional reactions.

The process of character synthesis and its result, the character model, depend on the mental dispositions activated by the film. In order to answer the questions posed above, one must be familiar with the dispositions most relevant for character reception and impression formation. On the basis of various approaches,²¹ we can say that relevant mental dispositions are shaped, learned, and activated in three different contexts:

1. During character reception, we rely on innate and learned *dispositions of social perception* in everyday reality that also shape impressions of real persons in direct encounters. When using these dispositions while watching a film, we predominantly proceed from cues in the film's represented world, such as the external appearance, actions, or environments of represented beings.
2. Through their encounters with film, literature and other media, viewers acquire a range of *media-specific dispositions*. Character reception is also based on media-specific knowledge, for instance about filmmaking and narrative conventions, and influenced by related information from outside a film's represented world, e.g., paratextual information about the genre of a film.
3. *Text-specific dispositions* are generated during the reception of individual films. They include expectations concerning a film's specific patterns of narrative and style, for instance, a film's repeated focus on similar kinds of characters, events, or audiovisual motifs. *Casablanca*, for example, is dominated by patterns of conspiracy, as almost all characters are involved in some secret escape plan, transaction, intrigue, or affair; the voice-over narrator points this out at the very beginning. This also leads us to expect conspiratorial behaviour on the part of the main characters.

All three types of dispositions have not only cognitive, but also affective aspects that play a role during the investigation of viewers' responses to characters. Affects steer the viewers' attention, and the development of a character model is influenced

21 See, for example, Martinez and Scheffel 1999: 123ff.; Bordwell 1989; Schneider 2000; Margolin 1986: 206–07; Culpeper 2000; Ohler 1994; Jannidis 2004.

by affective dispositions. Social categories, for example, are linked to biased feelings that involve in-groups and out-groups; media stereotypes such as the femme fatale are linked with emotions that are 'rehearsed' through use of the media; and concrete films generate specific overall moods. In the process of character reception, therefore, various cognitive and affective dispositions work together: the dynamic patterns of social perception interact with media knowledge and specific text elements. A more detailed description of this interaction follows. The basic hypothesis is that because of a film's communicative framework and specific representational techniques, character reception differs significantly from the social perception of real people, while at the same time, it is based on the latter and presumes its principles. For this reason, both general principles of social perception and a film's mediality and aesthetic form must always be considered in character analysis. Moreover, text-generated dispositions are bound to concrete media texts of extremely different types and genres. The means by which they are established in the viewers' memories will be explained more clearly in Part IV on the character as artefact. First, the following section will deal with the social and media dispositions of character reception and the processes in which they are applied.

5.2 Factors of Character Reception I: Social Perception and Cognition

Character models, as we have seen so far, are composed of mental representations relating to both stable and fleeting traits, processes and relationships in the areas of the body, psyche, sociality, and behaviour. The question is how we comprehend such traits during reception and are able to explain them in an analysis. Since the trait types specified above are also attributed to real beings and especially humans, I will start from the widespread assumption that character synthesis takes place largely in the same way that we think about real humans in everyday life, such as when we observe strangers (as suggested by Schwender 2001; Hartmann, Klimmt, and Schramm 2004). We will see below that this assumption quickly reaches its limits and must be augmented with a consideration of media-specific information processing. Nonetheless, as a methodical trick it enables us to identify similarities and differences between the perception of characters and of real people, at the same time introducing a number of concepts and explanations of understanding persons that can be applied to characters. Section 5.3 will later address the specific affordances of film and other media that frame, shape, and change the following processes of social cognition and lead to profound differences in understanding real people and media figures.

Character Reception as Social Perception: How Do We Understand Other Persons?

Let us first focus on the similarities between forming impressions of characters and forming impressions of real people. The assumption that we understand and experience characters in a way similar to humans is expressed in various theories through a wide variety of concepts.²² Semioticians assume that 'natural' or 'social' codes, in other words acquired knowledge about the everyday world, are employed to understand characters.²³ Cognitive media theories identify the partially innate and partially acquired mental dispositions that are employed when perceiving humans and imagining characters.²⁴ Approaches from evolutionary psychology regard media and their characters as 'decoys of social behaviour for the eye, ear, and brain' that enable simulation of behaviour for various purposes from entertainment to social learning and collaboration.²⁵ Media psychologists set up an analogy between character reception as 'parasocial interaction' and the manner in which other people are treated in real social contexts.²⁶ In fictional world theories, it is assumed that the 'principle of minimal departure' applies to the construction of invented textual worlds, in which fictional characters differ from real beings only when this difference is represented explicitly.²⁷

Despite their many differences, all such theories involve one assumption: the fact that we attribute the same traits to characters as we do to humans, and often react to them in similar ways, would not be comprehensible if the mental dispositions for character reception and perception of persons did not align in many respects. Otherwise, how could it be explained that we often think we know what a character feels based on a small amount of external information? This is especially true with regard to audiovisual media, as its stimuli are in many ways comparable to the real world's. The represented world in film often looks and sounds quite similar to the world we live in. Experiments have shown our innate tendency to attribute an inner life and social relations to objects depicted in audiovisual form—even randomly moving objects (see Zimbardo and Gerrig 1999: 426–27).

Put simply, we are able to understand anthropomorphic characters in film and other media because we can also understand humans. In understanding characters, we depend on, among other things, dispositions that underlie perceptions of real

22 See Koch 1991: 232ff.; Chatman 1978: 126, 128; Grabes 1978: 407.

23 For an overview see Chandler 2001c.

24 E.g., Gerrig and Allbritton 1990; Bordwell 1992; Smith 1995; Anderson 1996: Chapter 8; Schneider 2000; Culpeper 1996, 2000.

25 The quotes are from Schwender 2001; see also Schwender and Schwab 2007.

26 For more on the concept of parasocial interaction, see Hippel 1992; Giles 2002; Hartmann, Klimmt, and Schramm 2004; Horton and Wohl 1986. Characters can also be designated 'parapersons', in the same way as by Hans J. Wulff. However, Wulff emphasizes the 'semiotic distance' separating viewers and characters in his work (Wulff 1996).

27 For more information on the principle of minimal departure, see Ryan 1991: 52.

people. After all, not only character models but also our mental representations of real persons are constructs that are always incomplete, contradictory, full of vagueness and unclarity, and based in part on texts, such as linguistic statements. This is even true of our self-images, no matter how well we think we know ourselves. Daily life involves constant efforts to understand the traits and inner lives of friends, relatives, and co-workers, or to generate mental representations of others we have no direct contact with, such as politicians or celebrities. The greatest difficulty is to infer mental and social traits that are not directly visible, based on a limited amount of information and external perceptions. Such perceptions or information about another person, especially strangers, give rise to prejudices, attitudes, feelings, and behaviours that are hardly ever objective. On the contrary, they are generally subjective and biased. In direct encounters, such tendencies can be steered in certain directions by deliberate self-presentation, but the wide range of cinematic devices can do that much more effectively. Investigating those processes can help explain why certain bits of information are integrated into a character model while others are ignored.

This brings up difficult questions: How do we perceive and understand other humans? How do we form mental representations of them and their traits? How do we explain their behaviour and grasp their inner and social lives? How do we comprehend them; how do we react to them emotionally? Various concepts are employed in the fields of psychology and philosophy to examine these questions, and a selection of them will be combined in the following provisional proposal.²⁸

Social psychology and philosophy of mind provide particularly detailed explanations of how we understand others, mostly in works dealing with *social perception* and *social cognition*. These two terms are essentially synonymous, but set different emphases: both refer to the processing of information about our social environment, and fellow humans in particular, but the first term stresses immediate sensory and bodily reactions, while the second emphasises the role of conscious thought.²⁹ In this context, many positions in cognitive and media research limit themselves to one particular aspect, the so-called Theory of Mind (ToM), i.e., the ability to understand the mental states of others, their thinking and feeling. However, the concept of a 'Theory of Mind' is ambiguous and problematic (Schaafsma et al. 2015). Implicit 'folk theories' like the ToM are manifested in statements and behaviours, but they are theories in a figurative sense only. They generally exist less in the form of propositional knowledge than of practical abilities. Most of their assumptions are preconscious; their conclusions are

28 In addition to social cognition and social perception, this refers to social categorisation, person perception, impression formation, folk psychology, attribution theory, mind-reading, or Theory of Mind, and (implicit) personality theory. In the fields of literary and media studies, some of these concepts have already been dealt with; see Zunshine 2006; Jannidis 2004; Persson 2003.

29 'The psychological processes that enable humans to perceive the traits of others and their own personal peculiarities are termed social perception' (Zimbardo and Gerrig 1999, 426). For more on the concepts of social cognition and social perception, see Brewer and Hewstone 2004, xi; Zebrowitz 1990; Lavine, Borgida and Rudman 1994; relevant articles in Manstead and Hewstone 1999.

probabilistic. They may include biases, prejudices, and an eclectic, culturally specific mixture of historical ideas about human nature. This raises the question what kinds of dispositions are actually included in a ToM. Moreover, this concept is too narrow for our purposes. After all, a range of further implicit, naive ‘theories’ will be relevant in social cognition that relate not only to understanding the transient mental processes of others, but also to understanding many further psychological, physical, and social properties. One could thus speak not only of a ToM or a folk psychology, but also of a folk physics, folk biology, or folk sociology.

My rough approach to social perception/cognition in the case of characters (as developed in the first edition of this book) is therefore broader and more inclusive. It corresponds in many respects to the philosopher Albert Newen’s more recent and thorough Person Model Theory (Newen 2015), which I would therefore like to refer to briefly. Newen starts from the observation that the three dominant theories of understanding others—Theory Theory, Simulation Theory, and Interaction Theory—do not do justice to the complex phenomenon. When trying to understand others, depending on the situation, we may sometimes use implicit folk theories, but in other cases rather try to simulate their experiences and perspectives, or be spontaneously guided by direct interaction with them. Which way we take and what mental dispositions are activated depends, among other things, on the situation and its practical demands, the availability of certain information and relevant cognitive resources, as well as the salience and recurrence of certain stimuli. Therefore, a ‘multiplicity view about the epistemic strategies for understanding others’ seems suitable. Moreover, this view would need ‘to account for the fact that we usually understand others on the basis of specific background knowledge that becomes more enriched during our life’ and ‘turns on developing “person models” of ourselves, of other individuals, and of groups’ (Newen 2015: 1).

Before describing different kinds of mental dispositions in social cognition, let us keep in mind where it starts from: we employ a limited amount of available information to arrive at a wide range of conclusions (abductive inferences) about other features and processes we have no direct access to. Easily accessible information involves primarily a person’s external appearance; their behaviours, including verbal and nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions, gestures, or postures; the external situation they are in; and statements concerning the person in question made by others or the person themselves. Such cues represent the starting point for grasping further traits that are perceptible in solely an indirect way, most importantly a person’s fleeting mental processes; the motives of their behaviour; their personality traits; and their social situations, positions, and relationships. Every trait inferred in this way can activate further associations and expectations. We can also infer directly perceptible traits from information about characteristics that are not directly perceptible. For example, when we hear that someone is depressive, we tend to imagine a physically weak person rather than an athletic one.

The formation of mental models and other reactions to characters can thus be explained more precisely if they are understood as text-driven processes of social cognition that build on different types of dispositions to go beyond the directly conveyed information. Depending on interest, situation, and available information, dispositions of different degrees of generality can be activated. In the following, I will briefly outline three groups of dispositions that have been developed in different strands of theory, but all seem to be relevant to social cognition. A very general and basic level of understanding is formed by the schema of the human person and ideas of human nature. More concrete are categories and prototypes of the social, including social stereotypes. Finally, folk psychological dispositions (or the ToM) are used to understand in detail the inner life, behaviour, and personality of individuals. These three groups of dispositions are clearly interrelated, but depending on the situation, one of them may become more important than the others. Moreover, films can deliberately aim to activate certain dispositions rather than others. Thus, a psychological drama may aim primarily at folk psychology, a propaganda film at social stereotypes, and a highly stylised animated film at notions of the universally human.

This chapter is about how dispositions of social cognition are used in the formation of mental models of characters. However, it is important to keep in mind that characters also contribute to shaping such social dispositions over time, and that they can also be interpreted as symptoms that make visible certain ideas of human nature, social categories, or folk theories of their time of origin (see Chapter 11 and Chapter 12).

The Person Schema and Ideas of Human Nature (*Menschenbilder*)

The most general mental disposition, the schema of the (human) person, seems to be valid across cultures and indispensable in everyday encounters.³⁰ It unites very basic physical, mental, and social features which can form the starting point of a character model. A person is normally expected to possess an identifiable, continuous (human) body, (self-)perception, intentional experiences such as beliefs or wishes, feelings and emotions, the ability to communicate and act, as well as stable attributes such as personality traits. Persons are subjects of mental experiences, refer to themselves in the first person, are aware of the passage of time and their own existence over time, are capable of logical and instrumental rationality, have a specific personality and identity, and are able to communicate and to recognise others as persons. The differentiation between person and non-person, self and other is fundamental in dealing with the world. The self serves as a model for understanding others, and the human is used as a model for explaining the non-human. The terms 'human' and 'person' are not

30 See the philosophical clarifications of the concept of a person in Quante 2002: 19–23; Dennett 1981. For its application in film theory, see Smith 1995: 21ff.; Bordwell 1989: 151–68, especially 152. See also my definition of character as a recognisable being that is capable of intentionality or Jannidis' concept of the 'basic type': characters possess an inside and an outside; their traits can be constant or temporary; and they are able to act and communicate (Jannidis 2004: 185–95, 252).

identical: embryos are humans, but not persons; aliens, animals and fantasy characters can be imagined as non-human persons. General schemata for animals and other beings are frequently combined with the person schema to understand characters: Lassie is, in many ways, an extremely human(oid) dog. As long as there is no explicitly contradictory information, the person schema and the related prototype of a healthy human adult with free will represents a preconsciously accepted basis for comprehending anthropomorphic characters. They can be activated by minimal triggers, such as when one character says to another, 'You will meet *someone*'. The hypothetical character model of this 'someone' is then provisionally furnished with the basic features of a person.

Somewhat more specific than the person schema are ideas of human nature (*Menschenbilder*): 'conceptual networks of assumptions concerning [universally] human traits' (Barsch and Hejl 2000: 11), such as needs, values, life goals, and action tendencies.³¹ Ideas about human nature represent 'a fundamental basis of our self-image and every conscious formation of our social life'; they significantly influence norms and standards of normality, behavioural expectations, and identity concepts (ibid.: 7–8). For instance, that monotheistic religions view people in relation to a personal God, natural sciences in relation to evolution, and modern economics in relation to cost-benefit calculations, will each entail many further assumption. Concepts of human nature are often linked to religious, scientific, or political teachings, examples being Buddhist, Darwinist, or Marxist concepts of humanity. Implicit images of human beings interact with scientific theories. For example, competing positions in the field of psychology, such as psychoanalysis, behaviourism, and cognitive psychology, have differing ideas about the essence of humans:³² Are they shaped by unconscious drives, cognitive information processing, operant conditioning, or individual interactions with their environment? Each concept of humankind emphasises different behavioural explanations, values, and problems, focuses on certain aspects of human existence, and leaves out others. Thus, ideas of human nature can be regarded as prototypical bundles of characteristics that mentally pre-structure not just our dealings with real persons, but also character models in media production and reception. They provide the basis for the creation, perception, and interpretation of characters, and are expressed and manifest themselves in characters in this way.

So far, only initial steps have been taken towards a theory and history of ideas of human nature and of their connections to film and other media. Literary scholars Achim Barsch and Peter M. Hejl (2000) point out that in nineteenth-century Europe, in the course of secularisation, industrialisation, and scientific developments, a 'pluralisation of ideas about human nature' occurred. Various new ideas came to

31 An overview of concepts of human nature in the field of philosophical anthropology can be found in Paetzold 1989, a review of their relations to media as well as of the interdisciplinary literature on *Menschenbilder* in Eder, Imorde, and Reinerth 2012a.

32 See Asendorpf 1999: 15–16, 28–29, 36–37, 65, 83–84.

the fore, joining the Christian conception that had previously prevailed in Western countries. The human being was alternatively seen as a physical-chemical system, an evolutionary creature, a subject of physico-psychological decline, a being with a limited capacity to process information, a member of a (national) reproductive community or a historical, free individual (Barsch and Hejl 2000: 64–71). Such culturally specific concepts of the universally human are not congruent with the general person schema or with folk-psychology; instead, they fill them out in a certain way, modify them, and in certain cases, conflict with them. They normally do not include nuanced ideas of the structure of an individual's psyche, instead bundling prototypical assumptions about the 'essence' of persons, about anthropologically constant characteristics common to everyone and about general relations between body, mind, and sociality.

Basic patterns of characters' properties usually correspond to the general person schema and interlink certain general physical, mental, and social properties (stable anthropoid body; mental intentionality; ability to form relationships). If characters deviate from these patterns, it is usually explicitly shown and seen as conspicuous. However, media and art can challenge any aspect of the person schema or a certain *Menschenbild*. For instance, in a film a person might not be human, but an alien or an animal. Any general properties of a person or human might be changed or dissolved. Problems involving personality, self-consciousness, individual autonomy, biographical identity, or the relation between body and mind are staples of science fiction, horror, or fantasy genres; in some cases, even personal unity is called into question (*The Fly*). In this way, characters can make us reflect on the most basic schemata of our thinking and eventually change them. Furthermore, filmmakers and audiences can have different views of human nature, which can result in different interpretations of characters as well as misunderstandings or conflicts, such as when a character is considered unrealistic or blasphemous. A theory and history of ideas of the human could thus be useful for analysing characters and audience responses.

However, to understand characters beyond their most general properties as persons or human beings, much more is needed. After all, their system of traits must be specific enough to distinguish them from other characters, and they must be unique and recognisable in their world. A small amount of information is often enough for this. Based on the neon sign announcing Rick's Café Américain, we expect to see not just any person, but a male, Anglophone nightclub owner named Rick. Even though this rudimentary construct is still far from a detailed character model that includes a detailed body image, a subtle inner life and complex social relationships, it is based on the activation of certain dispositions that in social psychology are subsumed under the term 'social categorisation'.

Social Categorisation and Typification

There is a vast interdisciplinary literature on social categorisation and related concepts such as social schemas, types, proto- and stereotypes, self-categorisation, and social identity.³³ As before, I will only attempt to capture essential ideas of this research field that are common to many relevant theories, at the risk of not doing justice to specific positions.

The most basic idea of social categorisation is that when we want to get a quick and easy picture of other people—which is usually the case—we try to put them into social categories. These categories, focused on social groups, roles, or relationships, then usually activate further dispositions, including more specific schemas, prototypes, and exemplars (salient instances of a category). On this basis, we expect a person or character to have certain social, as well as physical and mental, characteristics and view them primarily in this light when we form hypotheses about them, make associations, draw conclusions, explain their behaviour, and develop corresponding cognitive and affective attitudes towards them.

Social categories and related dispositions are closely linked with social identities, interests, values, and emotions. They are formed and used by social groups, manifest their power and are generally normative. Their link with values and feelings of approval or disapproval conveys behavioural norms. By categorising and comparing ourselves with others, we see ourselves in relation to certain groups, roles, or personality types; especially to in-groups whose characteristics and interests we share, and to out-groups we perceive as different, alien, or hostile. ‘The simplest and most far-reaching form of categorisation is the judgment as to whether other humans are like us’ (Zimbardo and Gerrig 1999: 436). The perceived concurrence with our self-image and perceived social identity—a basic form of ‘identification’—can affect each category.

The number of available categories is immense, and many of them vary culturally and historically. The relevant categories can, for example, be determined from the viewers’ vocabulary, their folk sociology, or other bodies of knowledge.³⁴ Culpeper (2000) distinguishes between three general clusters of social categories: ‘group

33 For a general overview, see Fiske and Morling 1999; Zimbardo and Gerrig 1999: 436. On self-categorisation and social identity, see Trepte and Loy 2017. On social categorisation, stereotypes, and discrimination, see Brylla 2023. On the relationship between categories, schemata, prototypes, and exemplars see Fiske and Morling 1999; Schneider 2000, 46; Hogan 2003a: 44–47. Schneider differentiates categories, as ‘knowledge structures in which information about objects and events are organized in light of *common characteristics*’, from schemata organised according to contiguity principles and basically considers them prototype-centred and vague (Schneider 2000: 46; italics added). Categories can be components of mental schemata, and schemata can be employed to grasp traits, which can then serve to categorize an object. Stereotypes are prototypes, usually with a negative connotation that has become collectively entrenched (see, for example, Berg 2002; Schiappa 2008; Brylla 2023). The relevant categories available to a recipient group can be reconstructed with the aid of their linguistic expressions (see Klapp 1962) or widespread personality theories for the social milieu or time period involved (see Schneider 2000: 173–210). Using the ‘shrew’ as an example, Culpeper (2000) shows how the existence of a schema in a historical audience can be proven and manifests itself in a text.

34 See, for example, Zebrowitz 1990; Klapp 1962; Schneider 2000: 173–210.

categories' assign humans to social groups, e.g., according to gender, age, class, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or political camps: Rick is a middle-aged man, white, upper middle class, a US citizen, an expatriate, and opposed to the Nazis. 'Role categories' concern a person's position in structured social relationships, such as in a familial or professional environment, and the related expectations of interaction patterns. As most people live within a complex network of relationships, the same person can be perceived in a variety of roles; for example, Rick can be seen as a nightclub owner, an employer, lover, friend, etc. 'Personality categories' organise humans according to their personality traits, e.g., as introverts or extroverts, cowards or sensation-seekers. In these terms, Rick could be considered an introvert, cynic, or idealist. Group, role, and personality categories can be combined in various ways, and a particular kind of category can dominate.³⁵ The categorisation of a character into several different social groups, roles, or personality traits may allow viewers to cross the borders between their in-group and the characters' out-group: despite being female, a viewer might feel similar to Rick because she is an introvert, owns a bar, or opposes the Nazis. However, media can also direct their audience's attention towards certain categories and hide others. For example, an animation film could focus on a certain personality category (the neurotic behaviour of Daffy Duck) without revealing much about their group membership or social role.

In everyday life and in the media, the salience of certain features tends to activate certain categories more than others. Which these are depends on various factors, e.g., what information is provided and how conspicuous it is, the situational context, interests, cognitive capacities, memory contents and affects, the time available, what mental processes have taken place beforehand, and which categories are quickly accessible (often those that are common in everyday life and offer a good trade-off between simplicity and information). Many roles and group affiliations are also externally signalled by culturally conventionalised signs (e.g., a soldier's uniform). Films suggest a certain categorisation by foregrounding such information about the characters or sometimes attributing certain categories directly, such as Rick's role as a nightclub owner. The example of Rick also suggests the complexity, transmediality, and temporality of categorisation. While the film introduces Rick as a nightclub owner, some film posters rather portray him as a lover, and Humphrey Bogart the actor evokes memories of the gangsters and detectives in his previous films.

Categories include mental *prototypes* of certain kinds of people, e.g., the 'typical' nightclub owner, introvert, American, or man. Social prototypes are collective mental

35 Culpeper's distinction of the three forms of categorisation does justice to this diversity and is therefore, in my view, more suitable for character analysis than approaches that focus exclusively on the classification of people into social groups (e.g., Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, see Trepte and Loy 2017), thereby subsuming role categories and neglecting personality categories.

representations of what people of a certain category are normally like, what standard pattern of characteristics they have.³⁶ The idea of this prototypical combination of traits is shaped by specific sociocultural experiences as well as, by contrast, effects (Hogan 2003a: 44–46). For example, what is considered a ‘typical man’ or ‘typical woman’ does not correspond to the statistical average characteristics of all men or women. Rather, it overemphasises salient characteristics that distinguish particularly ‘masculine’ men from particularly ‘feminine’ women (e.g., in terms of body proportions or voice pitch), and the idea of a ‘typical’ man or woman will differ in Russia, Nigeria, and China.

While certain prototypes are common and widespread across cultures, other typologies, for instance those of psychoanalysis or humoral pathology, are only known by members of certain audiences in certain times.³⁷ Orrin Klapp (1962) describes a complex of typical male roles in the US society of the mid-twentieth century that can be reconstructed on the basis of how they are spoken of (cf. Dyer 1999: 48ff.). In this sense, Rick can be seen as a combination of two male types. He is amiable, down to earth, and has firm principles like the ‘good Joe’; at the same time, he demonstrates a blend of power, competence, fairness, and aggressiveness with a readiness to do violence that reveals him to be a ‘tough guy’.

The trait patterns of several different prototypes often overlap to some extent, and the assignment to a prototype can shift due to a small amount of additional information (see Stroebe, Hewstone, and Stephenson 1996: 123–24). For instance, the types of the introvert, the neurotic, and the thinker share many characteristics. The typical introvert is considered withdrawn, shy, insecure, nervous, and pensive. Typical neurotics have a great deal in common with that, but they are considered pathological social outsiders. The typical thinker, again, has commonalities with both, but is set apart by an abundance of knowledge, creativity, and intelligence. In Rick’s case, the traits of the introvert and the thinker are combined with independence, aggressiveness, and strong self-confidence, meaning that he fits both types only partially.

Prototypes have a tendency to consolidate into *stereotypes*, i.e., overly generalised, rigid, and schematic mental representations of members of a certain social group on the basis of their membership alone.³⁸ This concerns the much-discussed group categories of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, but also role and personality types such as the stereotypical teacher or neurotic. Mostly, stereotypes are used as ‘pejorative

36 I will not follow Klapp’s (1962) distinction between positive ‘social types’ and negative ‘stereotypes’, which has been criticised already by Dyer (1999: 47).

37 See Asendorpf 1999: 137–41. Other examples are, for example, the homeopathic types arranged according to medications (Pulsatilla, Natrum muriaticum, etc.); the enneagram types; Kretschmer’s constitutional types (leptosomatic, athletic, and pyknic; see Asendorpf 1999: 146–47); and Hippocrates’ typology of the humours, melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric, and sanguine.

38 On social stereotypes see, for example, Stroebe, Hewstone, and Stephenson 1996: 162; Ganter 1997; Schönplüg 1998; Bar-Tal and Teichman 2005; on stereotypes in the media see Hall 1997; Culpeper 2000; Berg 2002; Schweinitz 2011; Brylla 2018, 2023. In contrast to some other approaches (as described in Brylla 2023), I do not assume here that all social stereotypes already combine the categories of social group, social role, and personality. In my view, this combination is frequent and relevant, but not a prerequisite of stereotyping.

overgeneralisations' in relation to out-groups (Schiappa 2008: 16), but they can also be positive and can refer to one's in-group (autostereotypes). Mental stereotypes interact with stereotypical depictions in the media. The significance of stereotyping for character analysis has been examined particularly in the field of cultural studies (e.g., Fiske 1997; Hall 1997). In critical film analysis, comprehensive 'stereotypologies' have been worked out, such as for African Americans (Bogle 2004) or Arabs (Shaheen 2001). Charles Ramírez Berg (2002) distinguishes five widespread Latinx stereotypes in Hollywood cinema: the Bandido, the Latin Lover, the Male Buffoon, the Female Clown, and the Dark Lady. The character models that correspond to these stereotypes link certain physical, psychological, and social traits and behaviours—mostly considered negative—to the central characteristic of group membership. For example, the Bandido stereotype (see Figure 29 in Chapter 8) involves the physical traits of being male, dark-haired, unattractive, and unkempt, as well as certain items of clothing (sombrero, bandolier, holster, and belt); the psychological traits of stupidity, animal instincts, brutality, and cowardice; the social traits of belonging to a criminal gang and possessing low status; and a characteristic behaviour, such as harassing women or ambushing the hero. This example shows that external characteristics, behaviour, inner lives, and sociality are closely linked with values and affective attitudes in social and textual stereotypes, and that such stereotypes are often gendered. Characters can correspond to stereotypes to a greater or lesser degree; often, it is enough to show a few relevant characteristics to evoke the stereotype as a whole in viewers' minds. Theories of intersectionality stress that discriminating stereotypes and categories are often combined and can lead to multiple discrimination (see Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). Later chapters will return to issues of stereotyping (particularly Chapters 8 and 10). At this point I would only like to refer to the more recent literature on the subject (Brylla 2023 is particularly recommended; Thiele 2015 provides a substantial overview).

So far, we can say that characters are categorised in terms of their social groups, roles, and personalities. Certain prototypical patterns are often emphasised and others marginalised in the character model. Categorisation can confer a narrow set of social, physical, and psychological traits on a character, or additional information can lead to a more nuanced understanding. Characters can thus be perceived either more as 'one-dimensional' types or more as 'round', 'multidimensional' individuals (see below and Chapter 8). But whether persons and characters are regarded as types or as individuals, in either case mental states and personality traits are attributed to them. This is where dispositions of folk psychology come into play.

Folk Psychology and Inner Life

When we perceive fellow humans and characters and try to understand their behaviour, *folk psychology* plays a crucial role in our implicit 'common sense theories'.³⁹ This involves

39 See Persson 2003: Chapter 4; Asendorpf 2005: 1–11; Städtler 2003: 1069–71. The criteria of scientific theory include explicitness, an empirical foundation, consistency, verifiability, completeness, economy

a system of mostly pre-conscious, intuitive assumptions and abilities used to deal with psychological phenomena, to explain behaviour, and to understand inner lives and personalities. This system builds on some innate capabilities but is also interrelated with cultures and discourses, including films. A lot of our pleasure in watching films comes from grasping the motives, thoughts, and feelings of characters. Their personalities are normally a central component of the character model and trigger expectations about how they will act. Moreover, folk psychological assumptions are used to understand many social traits. Scientific reconstructions of folk psychology help explain how viewers attribute certain mental processes and personality traits to characters. In addition, they identify essential dimensions of the psyche, thereby facilitating the analysis of characters. Two broad areas of folk psychology are distinguished (Asendorpf 2005: 3–5; see Diagram 10):⁴⁰

- The *folk theory of mental processes* consists of assumptions about fleeting mental episodes and experiences—how people perceive, think, feel, etc. In scientific theories, this area is discussed under headings such as ‘*mind-reading*’, ‘*mentalising*’, or *Theory of Mind (ToM)*.
- The *folk theory of mental dispositions* consists of assumptions about enduring psychological traits that are seen as causing a person’s behaviour (e.g., their knowledge, temperament, or interests). The totality of these dispositions makes up the personality. Grasping permanent personality traits is also discussed as ‘*implicit personality theory*’, ‘*impression formation*’, and ‘*attribution*’.

The implicit knowledge of psychological processes and characteristics is also part of *folk theories of behaviour*. When we observe a character’s external traits and behaviours, we can draw conclusions about their inner life, personality, and further actions by applying our common sense ‘theories’. Particularly in the case of film, we often begin with observable behaviour. For instance, an action can either be explained by a psychological process—‘Rick did that because he was in a bad mood’—or by an unchanging characteristic—‘Rick did that because he is misanthropic’. Psychological traits are often inferred in several stages:⁴¹ at first, we recognise the character’s individual mental states, such as motivations for action, thoughts, and feelings in a certain situation. These are then—especially when they reappear in similar situations—integrated into the character model, bundled into character traits of a higher order, and generalised to create an overall impression of the personality. In the ideal case, this process results in a relatively coherent constellation of psychological characteristics.

of terminology, productivity, and applicability. While folk psychology is complete, productive, and easily applicable, it does not satisfy the other criteria (Asendorpf 1999: 6–11). Propositional reconstructions unavoidably distort folk psychology (John 1994: 58–63), but can help to distinguish some key structures; one example is the detailed analysis of everyday emotional terms by the psychologist Ulrich Mees (1990).

40 Reconstructions of both areas of folk psychology have already been applied in character analysis. On mental processes, see, for example, Jannidis 2004: Section 5.8; Zunshine 2006; on mental dispositions, see Schneider 2000; Culpeper 2000.

41 See Persson 2003: Chapter 4; for literary characters, see Margolin 1986: 205.

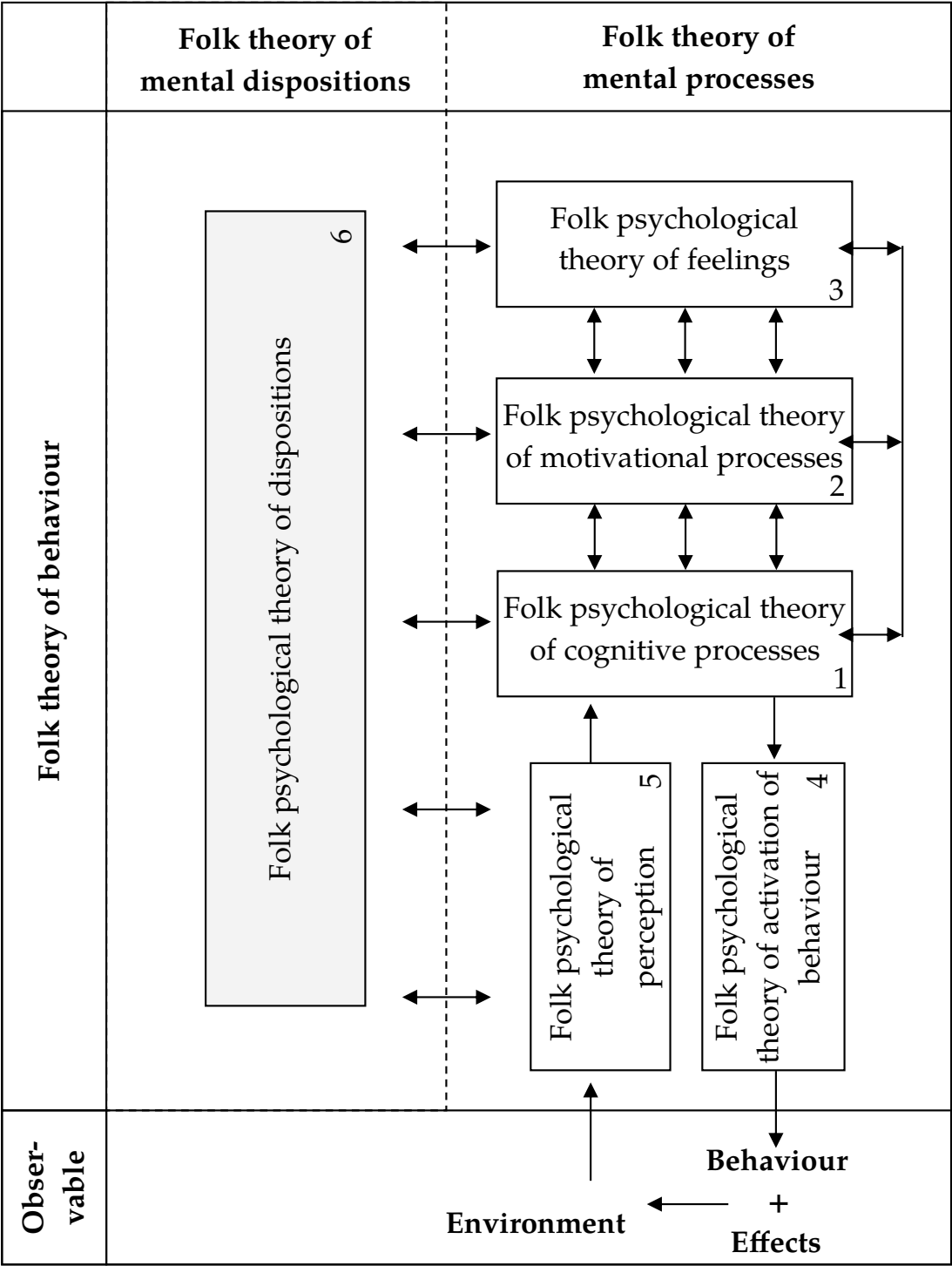


Diagram 10 The structure of folk psychology (adapted from Asendorpf 2005: 4, quoting Laucken 1974)

Since grasping the character's psychological processes frequently provides a basis for understanding their personality, they will be discussed here first, based on work by psychologists such as Asendorpf and media scholars such as Persson.⁴² So, what kinds of mental processes and states may be attributed to characters (and persons) in the first place? We can distinguish four large groups:

1. perceptions such as seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching or temperature sensations;
2. cognitions such as thinking (pondering, reasoning, remembering, imagining, dreaming) and entertaining beliefs (opinions, expectations, assumptions);
3. affects, including object-related emotions such as joy or anger; more diffuse moods such as elation or depression; and bodily feelings such as pain or hunger; and
4. motivations, such as intentions, needs, desires, wishes, or goals, and corresponding evaluations.

These types of mental processes are, in the view of folk psychology, closely linked to each other and to behaviour. Actions are explained by a combination of desires and beliefs: a person acts in the belief that doing so will help them fulfil a certain desire. Thoughts and opinions are formed on the basis of perceptions: seeing is believing. Motives result from affects: a person wants something because it evokes pleasant feelings. Affects arise from cognitions in relation to motivations: a person has a certain emotion because a situation reminds them of a past experience or because they assess the situation according to their motives.

In character reception, these kinds of connections enable us to go beyond explicit information. Viewers often infer the characters' desires and beliefs from their actions, and their feelings from their desires, or their thoughts from their perceptions. The extent to which such conclusions are taken for granted becomes especially clear when they are subverted, such as in surrealist film. A character's behaviour can seem absurd and puzzling, as in Luis Buñuel's *Un chien andalou*, in which a woman sits calmly while someone slices open one of her eyeballs with a straight razor.

When viewers draw conclusions about characters' perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and motives on the basis of a limited amount of information, the question arises of just what 'drawing a conclusion' means in this case, or more precisely, in what way they grasp these processes. Psychology, philosophy, and media studies foreground three basic possibilities.⁴³ Firstly, viewers can behave as uninvolved observers, watching the

42 See Persson 2003: 159–82; Asendorpf 2005: Chapter 1. Similar categorisations can be found in philosophy of mind and fictional worlds theory.

43 One variant of observer theory, which is called theory-theory in the philosophy of mind, is supported in film studies by, among others, Noël Carroll (1998: 245–90). The opposite pole of simulation theory is supported by, for example, Torben Grodal (1999, 2001). A combination can be found in the works

characters from a distance and drawing conclusions about their inner lives through abstract thought and acquired knowledge. In this case, folk psychology would be a 'theory' in a narrower sense, a purely cognitive, cold methodology, separate from senso-motoric, motivational, and affective processes (see Gordon 1995: 4).

Secondly, viewers can act as involved actors and understand the characters 'from inside' through embodied acts of simulative imagination—a 'hot methodology' (ibid.). Mentally simulating characters' inner lives would entail going through similar processes of perceiving, thinking, feeling, wishing in one's own mind. In contrast to drawing conclusions abstractly, this kind of simulation is always perspectivistic, embodied, sensory, and proprioceptive: 'To understand a situation in depth is to simulate this situation with eyes, bowels, heart, cognition, and muscles' (Grodal 2001: 119).

The third possibility involves a combination of the first two processes of understanding: in certain cases, we infer the characters' inner life as distanced observers, while in others we put ourselves in their situation and simulate it. When this happens, gradual transitions are possible; we alternate between the poles of abstract comprehension and empathising, are distanced observers, empathis, or even fellow actors (see, for example, Grodal 2001: 119ff.). Such gradual models of understanding others are the most convincing (see also Newen 2015). They can simply and plausibly explain identification, empathy, and distanced behaviour toward characters, for example laughing at suffering heroes in a comedy, and allow for raising the question of how films can steer degrees of distance and closeness to characters (see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14).

In other words, in addition to being able to operate with various bodies of knowledge, folk psychology includes the ability to simulate other minds. Both are acquired in part, though they are also based on innate foundations. Neuroscientific research on mirror neurons indicates that the human brain contains certain regions that react in a way similar to the actions of others, as if the observer themselves were the agent (for an application to film, see Gallese and Guerra 2012). Accordingly, characters' behaviour can sometimes be mirrored in the mind and virtually co-experienced in the body. Furthermore, emotion researchers debate whether some 'basic' emotions such as fear, joy, or disgust may be (partly) based on innate 'affective programs' (Ekman 2003). Some posit that the bodily and facial expression of such emotions may be similar in various cultures around the world and can be understood without extensive learning processes, meaning that certain emotions expressions could be considered basic semantic units of understanding characters (see Smith 2007). However, there are also many cultural variations of understanding others, for example sociocultural 'display rules' or 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 2012). Learning processes are important in many other ways. During their development, children learn the ability to adopt another's perspective. There are individual and gender-

based differences in the ability to feel empathy.⁴⁴ We also presumably rely on our own memories to understand complex experiences of characters. The psychologist Bertram Malle (2007: 17) differentiates the following possible ways to infer the inner lives of others and explain their behaviour:

- the application (normally preconscious) of general or specific *knowledge structures*, e.g., those involving the previously mentioned categories, schemata, prototypes, stereotypes, and exemplars;
- *simulation* as an imaginative realisation of the mental processes in the individual being observed (e.g., by means of mirror neurons);
- *projection* as an implicit assumption that the same mental processes are taking place in the mind of the individual being observed as in that of the observer; and finally
- *covariation analysis*, i.e., comparison of the similarities and differences in the behaviour of various persons and situations.

In the course of a film, we often observe developments in the main character's mind very closely and with a focus that shifts between different experiences. Rick's emotions develop from a cynical combination of bitterness and humour to melancholy reminiscences, lovesickness, hostility, and renewed love, concluding with calm self-confidence and sacrifice at the film's end. When Rick hears 'As Time Goes By' or sees Ilsa, his perceptions are foregrounded and seem to refer to his feelings. Rick's motivation is often relatively unclear and wavering; he seems to be embroiled in an inner conflict, which does not conform to the classical dramaturgical rules of mainstream film, according to which the protagonist must pursue a clearly identifiable goal. Near the film's end, he apparently finds such a goal through his thinking, in other words his intrigue and plan to save Ilsa, while the viewers are left in the dark.

The details of what I have summarised here are extremely complex. A film can be considered a stream of characters' linked and interrelated experiences that the spectators grasp without clearly being aware of doing so.⁴⁵ The viewer often jumps from marginal external clues to far-reaching assumptions about a character's thoughts and feelings, generally about the other characters. This is true not only of the central love triangle involving Rick, Ilsa, and Victor Laszlo, but the whole range of minor interactions as well. Early in the film, the Russian bartender flirts with the attractive Yvonne, who had an affair with Rick. She gets drunk; then Rick lets her know in an insulting manner that he wants nothing more to do with her, throws her out, and tells the bartender to take her home in a taxi. After a short pause, he adds, 'And come right back'. At that moment, viewers can grasp a network of the characters' intertwined assumptions about the inner lives of others, namely that:

44 For example, many studies show a female advantage in the ability to empathise. For a review and a discussion of possible factors, see Christov-Moore et al. 2014.

45 Ryan 1991 speaks of embedded narratives; see also Zunshine 2006; Palmer 2004.

- *Rick* assumes and wants to prevent
- the *bartender* from making a move on *Yvonne*, because he thinks that
- *Yvonne* is intoxicated, angry, and emotionally needy, and that she believes
- *Rick* would be jealous or angry if she has a sexual encounter with the bartender, and in this way, she could take revenge for the fact that
- *Rick* treats her so coldly.

Presumably, viewers will fathom the intertwined thoughts and feelings that the characters might have concerning other characters' inner lives to different degrees. In addition to the time available for doing so, this depends on the individual viewer's social and media experience. In any case, they must observe the characters' perceptions of the situation and reconstruct their points of view towards each other, to some extent at least, in order to understand the action. After the film ends, the characters' psychological processes can be further elaborated in analysis and interpretation. In other words, the model constructed while watching a film and its subsequent elaboration are not identical.



Fig. 8 *Casablanca*: Rick humiliates Yvonne. (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.)

Personality

The scene with Rick, Yvonne, and the bartender lets us draw conclusions not only about the characters' momentary feelings and thoughts but also about their more permanent psychological characteristics: Yvonne is apparently a woman with low self-esteem and self-control; the bartender is a rogue with loose morals; and Rick demonstrates egotism and a certain amount of cruelty. Observing their behaviour and reconstructing the characters' mental processes thus contribute to assumptions about their *personality*, i.e., the individual system of relatively stable psychological dispositions which ensure that a person behaves in a consistent way in various situations and at different times.⁴⁶ (*Moral*) *character* can be understood as that crucial part of the personality that drives moral actions.⁴⁷ Even quite simple or typified figures have a personality and a character in this sense, and it can be differentiated in subtle detail in psychological portraits. Personality and moral character are not only inferred from observations of external behaviour, but in turn make it possible to predict behaviour. Since Rick treats Yvonne callously, we can expect that he will behave similarly in other situations.

Over time, many thinkers have tried to answer the question of what dimensions and structures the personality possesses and how they can be inferred. A brief overview of some of the more controversial answers will be provided later. For now, we can include the psychological traits cited by Egri: values, temperament, general attitude toward life, contact behaviour, habits, and abilities. From a philosophical perspective, personality represents 'the individual form of personhood in an individual's life history; their evaluative attitudes; their emotional and habitual frame of mind; their convictions, wishes; their life plans; their self-image of their own abilities, strengths, and weaknesses' (Quante 2002: 22).

For most forms of character analysis, what personality actually is in a theoretical sense *is* less important than how filmmakers and recipients *understand* it. In other words, the most vital matter is their disposition theory, or more precisely, their *implicit personality theory* as part of folk psychology that describes, predicts, and explains particular individual features (Asendorpf 2005: 5-6).⁴⁸ Research based on folk psychology identifies various personality dimensions.⁴⁹ The four key dimensions

46 See Zimbardo and Gerrig 1999: 520, 550. 'Personality' is sometimes understood as all traits that distinguish one human from another (see Asendorpf 2005: 5-6). However, physical characteristics are not listed in reconstructions of implicit personality theories, as psychological dispositions are the focus.

47 'X's character is X's normal pattern of thought and action, especially with respect to concerns and commitments in matters affecting the happiness of others or of X, and most especially in relation to moral choices' (Kupperman 1991: 17).

48 In the following illustration, I essentially rely on Asendorpf 2005: 1-11; see also Schneider 2000: 408.

49 Asendorpf 2005: 3, like Laucken 1997, distinguishes between act-enabling, act-shaping, and content-related dimensions. He includes, among the latter bodies of knowledge, concern-related dispositions, norm dispositions, and emotional dispositions, at the same time pointing out the systematic correspondences to implicit process theory, and also mentions the naive theory of perception in his diagram.

correspond to the above classification of mental processes: perceptual dispositions involve tendencies of seeing and other sensual encounters with the world. Cognitive dispositions include forms of knowledge, ways of reasoning, memories, self-image, and worldview. Affective dispositions are constant tendencies of affective response, such as timidity or cheerfulness. Motivational dispositions include subjective inclinations (needs, interests, and preferences) as well as internalised values and norms connected to intersubjective expectations, such as helpfulness and honesty. Two further personality dimensions concern the potentialities and forms of behaviour or action.⁵⁰ Abilities and weaknesses such as intelligence or talents determine the possibilities and limitations of behaviour; and behavioural modes such as caution, lethargy, or sense of humour determine the form of someone's behaviour. A person's traits within these dimensions can be attributed in a more or less condensed manner: for example, the combination of inflexibility, desire to maintain given standards of living, and the opinion that people only work well under pressure can be characterised as ultra-conservative (Asendorpf 2005: 5).

A person's individual personality traits form a system, a characteristic and hierarchically structured context. The various aspects of personality can influence and contradict one another. Someone might want to demonstrate moral courage due to their values, but be hindered by their timidity. In addition, such traits differ in importance and clearness. Self-concept, moral values, inner conflicts, emotional dispositions, and intelligence are usually more important than specialised knowledge about stamps. Psychologists assume that the core of the personality is formed by cardinal characteristics, 'fundamental character traits a person builds their life around' (see Zimbardo and Gerrig 1999: 523). Philosophy, psychoanalysis, and sociology assume that certain traits form a personality core, an identity, a 'self' (Bieri 2004: 412), 'identity themes' (Holland 1992), or 'existential points of view' (Schulze 1997).

Folk-psychological modelling of the personality system has heuristic value for character analysis. It permits clearer recognition of which aspects of the personality occupy the foreground in certain characters or genre types. The extent to which personality traits represented in the character model form a similarly systematic, complete, and hierarchical context is not certain and could vary considerably from character to character. While the folk-psychological mental representation of a consistent 'core personality' obviously provides the basis for a common dramaturgical praxis, such as shown by Linda Seger's character conception, some films specifically aim at denying the character an identity centre, subverting consistent structures in the character model, and creating the impression of fragmentation and ambivalence by means of incomplete or contradictory information. However, a personality model is still necessary to see which areas of the personality are represented or not and in which form.

50 Certain concepts in folk psychology cover several different dimensions. Temperament concerns both the intensity of feelings and predilections and the manner of action. Thus, the personality aspects are not clearly separated, but open up a dimensional space.

In addition, the personality of characters is profoundly intertwined with the film's themes, thus forming a bridge to a thematic understanding of the character (see Chapter 11).⁵¹ Screenwriting guides explicitly recommend defining the film's central idea through the characters' central values (McKee 1997). Dirty Harry and Judge Dredd deal with merciless justice because that is the central belief and value that determines their protagonists' actions. In Debra Granik's *Winter's Bone*, it is care, courage, loyalty, and integrity in the face of brutal power. Disgust with life and a need for meaning represent the antihero's personality core in Malle's *Le feu follet/The Fire Within* as well as the film's theme. In Fellini's *Otto e mezzo/8½*, it is fear of failure and the loss of creativity; in Welles' *Citizen Kane* the desire for love and the inability to love oneself; in Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* hubris and a grotesquely exaggerated self-image; and in Weerasethakul's *Uncle Boonmee* spirituality, kindness, and calm acceptance in the face of impending death.

Reconstructing a character's personality—their stable psychological traits—is therefore central to character analysis and film interpretation. This involves a difficult process, the results of which can vary greatly, as there are personal, sociocultural, and historical differences between the viewers' implicit personality theories. Personality traits are only indirectly accessible and notoriously difficult to verbalise; when describing them, one has to find the right degree of reduction. Often, generalisations of traits are only partially true. If a character is described as 'intelligent', does this mean quick computational skills, practical shrewdness, wise goal orientation, or social competence? Thus, the extent to which character models formed during reception are truly reconstructed through character analysis or subsequently elaborated is difficult to judge. A large amount of film interpretation seems to focus on teasing out the details of the main characters' personality based on the information the film provides, but that is limited by constraints of time and information-processing while watching a film.

Thus, it is no surprise that Rick's personality traits are also debatable. There is perhaps agreement that he loves and desires Ilsa, and that his emotional outlook is marked by bitterness, sentimentality, and unrequited love. Other characteristics are harder to define, even in a rough description. Why and in what way does he love Ilsa—on the basis of a profound bond, erotic passion, or injured self-esteem? Is he really intelligent, or is his behaviour rather immature when dealing with his unrequited love? Does he change in the course of the story, or does he remain the same? Is his decision to give up Ilsa really altruistic, or does he want to boost his own self-esteem?

Answering these questions requires referring to how we grasp personality traits. Personality categories and prototypes are stored in memory and can be activated by means of a number of cues: through language, such as when Captain Renault claims that Rick is actually a sentimentalist; through appearance, for example Rick's sensitive

51 Of course, theme need not necessarily be linked to the personality. In Sirk's *Imitation of Life*, Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf*, and Eisenstein's *Strike*, social constraints and relations are more important than the character's personality, or the hero's physical abilities in Superman.

face, his upright posture, and his elegant clothing; through places, situations, and social positions, such as Rick's dominant position within the microcosm of Casablanca; or through information about inner life, such as Rick's emotional outburst while drinking, his view of Ilsa, or his memories of the time they spent together in Paris.

At the same time, a given trait is normally associated with others that 'match'—'Attractive people tend to be considered intelligent' (Asendorpf 1999: 115), and Rick's social status also suggests intelligence. In light of the previous considerations, this is hardly surprising, as traits are connected in prototypes. For this reason, they are normally not attributed in isolation and instead trigger assumptions about other, associative traits, such as that an intelligent person is also efficient and competent.⁵² In psychology, this is known as the 'halo effect', which results in a number of expectations about other characteristics. It seems especially powerful when little is known about the character. This makes it possible to work with the art of suggestion—not everything relating to the character needs be shown—and this also allows surprises and disappointed expectations, if a suggested assessment is subsequently negated by additional information.

Assessments of personality are subject to further autonomous psychological dynamics that play a role with both real people and characters. For example, the first and last impressions, i.e., the first and last versions of the character model, are especially important (primacy and recency effect).⁵³ The initial impression influences the subsequent image of a character by directing the viewer's attention to the relevant stimuli. The first impression is relatively enduring, because viewers try to avoid cognitive dissonance, 'the state of conflict experienced after [...] being exposed to information that contradicts previous opinions, feelings, or values' (Zimbardo and Gerrig 1999: 433). Once a character model has been constructed, viewers attempt to stick with their assessment and eliminate dissonance in the presence of new and contradictory information by modifying the model, or ignoring or reinterpreting information that does not fit. Films can intentionally employ all these autonomous dynamics in the creation of impressions—the halo, primacy, and recency effects, the avoidance of cognitive dissonance—to generate character models.

Behaviour and Actions

Verbal and nonverbal actions and behaviour are considered especially important clues to judge personality. However, only what could be termed the outer layer of behaviour can be perceived, and its causes and motivations are inferred on that basis. Therefore, behaviour itself usually requires interpretation (Chapter 9 will deal with that in more detail). When, for example, Rick treats Yvonne cruelly, this could be explained by a wide variety of causes: his misogyny or sadistic egotism, his history of relationships, his disappointment by Ilsa, his role as a nightclub owner, concern about his status, moralistic anger about Yvonne or the scene she makes, the nature of their affair, a bad mood, and so on.

⁵² According to Stroebe, Hewstone, and Stephenson 1996, 117.

⁵³ For more on the use of such effects in narratives, see Grabes 1978; Hartmann 1995: 105–106; Schneider 2000.

This example makes the close relationship between behaviour, psychological experiences, and personality traits somewhat clearer. Firstly, perceptible actions can be comprehended and assessed only in reference to psychological causes, e.g., ‘sadistic humiliation’ or Rick’s ‘moral rebuke’ of Yvonne. Secondly, vice versa, we can draw conclusions about a person’s or character’s inner life and stable dispositions on the basis of their external behaviour. Drawing these conclusions normally takes place in the form of simulation, projection, or automatic application of mental schemata more than through conscious consideration of all the information, and it follows certain autonomous dynamics. Moreover, not all forms of behaviour are equally revealing and they can be viewed in different ways.

So how do we reach conclusions about the inner lives and traits of others on the basis of their behaviour? When is behaviour interpreted as a product of personality and moral character? What makes certain behaviours more revealing than others? Interesting answers are provided by social psychological theories of attribution. Bertram Malle (2007) summarised the various possibilities for explaining the main features of others’ behaviour in terms of folk psychology.⁵⁴ His outline includes a fundamental differentiation of intentional and unintentional behaviour. Unintentional behaviour, e.g., falling down, is explained by means of internal or external causes, such as an obstacle or epilepsy. Deliberate actions, such as the way Rick treats Yvonne, on the other hand, are explained in terms of intent (an aim or a decision) of the agent, who has psychological reasons for the action. These reasons include the desire to produce a certain state that is seen as positive and the belief that this desire can be fulfilled through such behaviour. Rick, for example, could hope to get rid of Yvonne by humiliating her, and he could believe that making cruel statements is the best way to achieve this. His reasons—the desires, assessments, and assumptions—have a certain past history, such as earlier experiences, sociocultural disposition, or situations. If there are reasons and intentions, then the person must also be able to implement their behaviour; in other words, certain enabling factors in the form of abilities or favourable circumstances must be present. Malle illustrates this connection in a schema (1999: 32; reproduced here as Diagram 11).

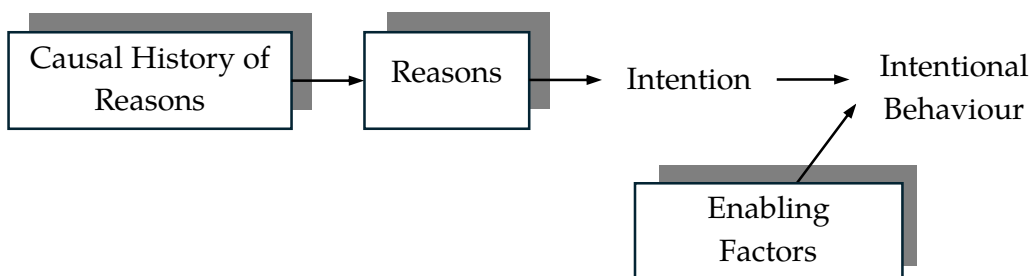


Diagram 11 Causal explanation of behaviour according to Bertram Malle (1999: 32)

54 The author thanks Fotis Jannidis for pointing out Malle. He evaluated one of Malle’s earlier works for character theory (Jannidis 2004: 190–92).

This model is useful for character analysis for a number of reasons, one of them being that it shows how a character's behaviour can be explained in several ways:

- It can be explained as a direct result of psychological causes, in other words the character's momentary inner life; their passing desires, wishes, assessments, and affects; opinions and other cognitions, e.g., 'Rick wanted to humiliate Yvonne/get rid of her/prevent her from embarrassing him'.
- Behaviour can also be explained by past history, and there are a variety of possible ways of doing this:
 - by referring to Rick's previous mental processes: 'Rick had thought for some time that a relationship with Yvonne was out of the question';
 - by referring to Rick's personality: for example, 'Rick has problems with women/is a sadist';
 - by referring to the origins of these personality traits, such as how they are affected by culture, upbringing and education, or personal experiences: 'Disappointment turned Rick into a misogynist', 'He was taught that men are supposed to be hard on women';
 - by referring to the situation: 'Rick was forced to maintain his authority as a nightclub owner', 'Yvonne provoked him'; or lastly,
 - by starting with enabling factors in a similar variety of ways (which is possibly not as plausible in this case): 'Rick is simply a quick wit, and as the nightclub's owner he has the authority to throw Yvonne out'.

The fact is immediately clear that each of these explanations involve different assessments of Rick's behaviour, and they make him seem more or less appealing as a character. In contrast to our everyday world, films can steer such behavioural explanations and assessments in a specific way; for example, antisocial actions on the part of characters can be legitimised or made to seem comprehensible. Experimental films, for example in surrealism, can also deliberately challenge or thwart common explanations for behaviour. In Chapter 9, on motivation and action, I will discuss characters' intentional actions in greater detail.

Social psychologists have identified certain tendencies and autonomous dynamics in the area of behavioural explanations as well. People generally tend to explain the behaviour of others as a product of personality and overestimate the latter in relation to the situation (fundamental attribution error; Gerrig and Allbritton 1990).⁵⁵ A tendency toward such characterisation is built into filmic depictions of actions in particular,

⁵⁵ This error seems to be caused partly by the fact that behaviour basically attracts more attention than other situational factors, that actors and actions are automatically regarded as parts of a whole, and that consideration of additional situational factors involves more cognitive effort (see Culpeper 1996: 351–52).

and even behaviour depicted casually is believed to be an indicator of the character's personality. We can observe a tendency to make dispositional attributions that prompts us to explain even the most conventional and predictable series of events, e.g., plots in James Bond movies, in terms of the characters (*ibid.*). The schematic nature of the plot disappears behind the tendency to see others as originators of events. This could be one of the reasons that our interest is maintained in spite of the predictability.

Whether we place responsibility for an action on characters or not, or blame them for a crime, depends on the perspective (see Chapter 13). When an action is shown from the external perspective of an uninvolved observer, there is a greater tendency to consider the agent responsible. When the perspective nears the agent's subjective situational perception, the willingness to consider the situational circumstances increases. This is how the choice of perspective can influence assessments of the character (Pollard-Gott 1993); for example, varying assessments of a character can be created by showing them from the outside first and then adopting their subjective point of view.

Jonathan Culpeper has integrated competing theories of attribution to determine which of a character's behaviours are particularly useful for identifying their personality.⁵⁶ His results may be illustrated with another example: at the beginning of *Casablanca*, the waiter states that Rick never drinks with his guests. Rick's decision to adopt this policy was *uninfluenced by external compulsions*; no one would stop him from doing so. Moreover, his refusal is *unambiguous*, and the waiter emphasises it for the guests. On top of that, Rick's behaviour demonstrates a *high degree of consistency*; he never drinks with guests. Furthermore, this behaviour is relatively *unspecific*; even if the guest was of high status, he never drinks with them. His refusal is, after all, rather *uncommon* and not prevalent among bar owners; many of them have an occasional drink with guests. A number of Rick's personality traits suggest explanations for his behaviour, such as arrogance, reserve, introversion, self-control, independence, etc. Some of these presumptions of traits are confirmed by other actions on his part, for example, by the fact that his rejection is repeated in various forms and with various characters. At the same time, the significance of breaking with this pattern is emphasised: When Rick drinks with Ugarte, Renault, Laszlo, and Ilsa, these must be extraordinary situations.

In other words, conclusions about character traits are drawn particularly from actions that take place voluntarily, that can be interpreted unambiguously, and that deviate from standard expectations. If the viewers are able to observe a character behaving in a variety of situations in the course of the film, they will make conclusions

56 See Culpeper 1996: 343–44. Culpeper applies the correspondent inference theory developed by Jones et al. and Kelley's covariation theory to literary and dramatic analysis, but his ideas are also applicable to film. Correspondence theories assume that the circumstances around an observed behaviour are taken into account first, then the immediate behavioural cause, and after that, conclusions are made concerning corresponding personality traits. Covariation theories consider, among other things, the extent to which certain behaviours vary among different persons, situations, and triggers.

about the character's personality traits on the basis of similar behaviour in response to various triggers (a low degree of distinctiveness), or repeated in a variety of circumstances (a high degree of consistency), and when other characters behave differently in comparable situations (a low degree of consensus). Such factors can be used throughout the film to guide the assessment of the character, e.g., giving more importance to certain actions compared to others.⁵⁷ In a similar way, deviations from social norms, group-specific standards, and individual behavioural patterns attract the viewer's attention (Culpeper 1996: 347). Unexpected behaviour that is considered socially negative, but also the conspicuous regularity and consistency of certain behaviours, have a particular tendency to elicit attributions (ibid.: 349). Thus, observed behaviours are important for the inference of the personality, but not all have equal significance. Particularly important are focused actions and repeated behavioural patterns that are uncommon, unexpected, deviate from social norms, and are also voluntary, unambiguous, consistent, and indiscriminate.

These attributive tendencies play an important role in characterisation. Films can portray characters in a clear and unambiguous way or leave them rather vague in order to focus attention on certain character traits or distract attention from them. Films can also emphasise specific traits by showing unambiguous, conspicuous, and unusual behaviour of the same type in a variety of situations and underlining them stylistically. They can make it easier or more difficult to draw conclusions about personality by having characters act in contradictory ways, not repeat revealing behaviour, or by having other characters act in an equally unusual manner (violence is extremely common in the world of *Mad Max* or film noir). Exploiting attributive tendencies makes multidimensional antiheroes such as Johnny in Mike Leigh's *Naked* appear to be victims rather than perpetrators, and therefore makes them appear still sympathetic even after they exhibit antisocial behaviour, by making the situation rather than the personality responsible. Ambiguous situations, contradictory information, and some positive actions lead to the presumption that the character is really not as bad as their actions make them seem.

Uses of and Problems with Social-Psychological Concepts in Character Analysis

Regarding character reception as a process of social cognition in which represented beings are perceived similarly to real people has led to some significant results. Firstly, it has produced a general structure of the character model as a system representing the physical,

57 In this way, attribution theories exhibit analogies to foregrounding theory in the field of literary studies, according to which an unusual text passage or one that is emphasised is especially important for interpretation. Culpeper assumes that the theory of foregrounding can be integrated into attribution theory: The latter describes a special case of human behaviour, namely literary verbal behaviour (1996: 348).

psychological, and social traits, relationships and behaviour of characters. The development of character models is based on mental dispositions that are decisive also for dealing with real people. They include the person schema; ideas of human nature; folk psychology and folk sociology; more specific 'naive' theories of mind, personality and behaviour; and social categories, prototypes, and stereotypes for social groups and roles. Furthermore, character reception is influenced by mostly preconscious, automatic heuristics and corresponding biases, such as primacy and halo effects, attribution errors, and avoidance of cognitive dissonance. Reference to folk psychology is therefore helpful to describe characters' psychological traits and explain how their attribution goes beyond the text itself.⁵⁸

However, regarding character reception as social cognition also raises some questions: To what extent are the processes and mental assumptions of social perception and folk psychology influenced individually and by culture? Some people consider their fundamental elements innate and universal, crossing time and culture (e.g., Malle 2007); others, however, are careful to limit themselves to adult Western recipients (e.g., Persson 2003: 173–81). At the very least, more specific social categories, implicit personality theories and ideas of the human vary culturally and historically. Learned by interacting with other individuals, they are influenced by cultural bodies of knowledge, and their socially dominant form changes over time. This means that some general fundamentals of social cognition are presumably valid for most films and characters. However, the more precise the model, the more it applies only to certain characters, time periods, and viewers. This calls into question the extent to which an analysis can be oriented toward not just the empirical, but also the intended or ideal reception in research on social cognition. The filmmaker's intentions or an ideal comprehension of the character need not necessarily depend on contemporary viewers' folk understanding; the ideal reception can go beyond it, and intentions can be idiosyncratic. With historical or non-Western characters and audiences, even greater caution would be advisable. As a rule of thumb, character reception will be more consistent with Western theories of social cognition when it involves recent Western mainstream films and their empirical viewers or target audiences. But even such cases involve significant differences between character reception and everyday perception of real persons. In character reception, specific affordances and dispositions of media, communication, and fiction come into play, and how they interact with everyday dispositions has been the subject of very little study.

5.3 Factors of Character Reception II: The Mediality of Characters

Until now, I have provisionally assumed that we perceive fictional characters in the same way as real people, which made it possible to identify key structures of social perception/cognition as being important for character reception. This is, however, just

⁵⁸ The fact that the folk-psychological model corresponds to the conceptions of analytical philosophy relating to consciousness, emotion, and behaviour can be viewed as providing additional plausibility because these approaches are intended to define everyday terms in a logical way.

one side of the coin. Banally stated, watching a film is not the same as observing real people. Film characters are not only seen as represented beings, they are also regarded as symbols, symptoms, and artefacts at the same time, and that in turn affects how the represented being is experienced. As viewers, we develop assumptions concerning indirect meanings, communicative contexts, and the characters' textual construction. We also activate media-specific dispositions and bodies of knowledge when doing so. These dispositions also let us draw conclusions about the represented being's characteristics and influence the development of the character model. Thus, our mental representations of textually represented, and particularly fictional, beings are profoundly shaped by the cognitive and affective assumptions of (fictional) media communication and differs from social cognition in everyday life. This has been the subject of hardly any empirical study, despite the fact that our everyday way of speaking about characters as well as media theories point this out. The following attempt to identify some crucial specifics of character reception brings together and complements findings of semiotics and theories of media, communication, and fictional worlds.⁵⁹ According to this, character reception differs from the perception of real people in the following ways (some of which are illustrated in greater detail in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8):

Awareness of communication and fiction: character reception is generally based on the conscious or preconscious awareness of participating in fictional media communication that is linked to certain communicative objectives, rules, and bodies of knowledge, and which does not claim a direct connection to reality. Character reception is a *text-driven* form of parasocial perception in which communication-, media-, and narration-specific schemata, rules and forms of prior knowledge, perception, and attribution are brought to bear. This means, among other things, that one can refer to sources beyond the represented world to infer characters traits. In other words, audiovisual and linguistic depictions of persons are not just 'mock-ups of social behaviour'; we can, for example, also reflect on and question their design, function, and impact. Characters involve traces of selecting and showing certain material, which make it possible for viewers to see them in relation to their creators and their intentions (Wulff 1999a, 1999d).

In addition, the particular *situation of perception* in the cinema or at home, in front of the computer or television screen, presumably influences the perception of characters. In contrast to everyday situations, there is an indissoluble spatial, temporal, and semiotic distance between the observer and the object of observation. Even in daily life, it makes a difference whether I observe people close up or from a distance, whether

59 For more on pragmatics, see Jannidis 2004: Chapter 2.6; Wulff 2001c. In the field of semiotics, André Gardies points out some important aspects. He asserts that film characters have four components: fictional person, actant, type, and actor or actress (1993: 53–68). This approach involves problems; it is unclear how the components interact and in what way they produce the character as an entity. Furthermore, the status of the individual components remains unclear: Does this involve elements of the character as a whole or factors in its constitution? In the latter, more plausible case, the number of factors is incomplete. Such problems can be solved from a cognitive perspective.

we are in the same room or separated by windows or other barriers. Film spectators know or at the very least can become aware that they are separated from the action in a much more fundamental way. They are not directly affected by it, cannot intervene, and are not, for example, obligated to help a character who is in danger. This enables particular forms of participation that include affective involvement and distance (see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14).

Media-specific forms of depiction: even if the filmic stream of sounds and images partly resembles stimuli in the real world, there are also significant differences. For instance, films focus attention through changes in shot size; make details of facial expressions visible in close-ups; jump between locations and points in time through editing; and establish parallels or disjunctions of image, sound, and music. A few of these affordances may have some parallels in real life (a close-up could correspond in some way to physically approaching a person), but even then, the possibilities in everyday encounters are much more limited, and for many forms of representation there are no real-life equivalents at all. Moreover, media techniques of guiding, shaping and focusing perception and attention can be deliberately emphasised and made conspicuous in non-illusionistic, experimental films. Mukii's *Yellow Fever*, for instance, fragments the movement of human bodies through pixilation, freely switches between different times and places as well as between photographic shots and animation, and uses the animation to create sudden physical transformations (see Chapter 4). In literature, the difference between encountering and interacting with real persons and reading about characters is even more obvious.

Deviations of fictional worlds and beings from reality: without a doubt, one of the most conspicuous aspects of character reception is that fictional beings and their worlds often differ from the real world in significant ways. For example, films can depict the future or the past, and their supernatural beings may have fantastic characteristics and violate the laws of folk psychology, sociology, even physics and biology (see Ryan 1991: 31–47). Many of these deviations, conflicts, and disruptions of perception go farther, to the point of suggesting the impossible, or completely deconstructing a character. The following text by Daniil Kharms (mentioned in Martínez and Scheffel 1999) could also be imagined as an animation film:

There lived a redheaded man who had no eyes and no ears. He didn't even have hair so that he was called redheaded only as a figure of speech.

He was unable to speak because he had no mouth. A nose, he didn't have either.

He didn't have hands and he didn't have legs. And he had no stomach, no back, no spine, and no innards to speak of. He didn't have anything! So that it's unclear who it is we're talking about.

In fact, we better change the subject now. (Kharms, January 7, 1937)⁶⁰

60 I owe this example to Martínez and Scheffel 1999: 123.

Pragmatic rules of communication: that a redhead has hair is a logical implication, and in addition there are some pragmatic implications that play a role in this example's startling effect—the mention of 'he' not only involves an assumption that a male being is involved, the person schema leads us to presume that the subject is a healthy human being who can speak and has a complete body. A writer or filmmaker would 'violate elementary pragmatic and communicative conventions by failing to inform us that the protagonist exists solely as an isolated brain' (Martinez and Scheffel 1999: 124). According to one of these conventions, things that are important for understanding the character are communicated in due time. As shown by the example, however, writers and filmmakers often play with such pragmatic conventions of communication. In Buñuel's *Cet obscur objet du désir/That Obscure Object of Desire*, the female lead is played by two different actresses, meaning that her appearance changes. We are to assume that this was neither the result of a mysterious transformation nor a mistake; instead, the intention was to make a thematic statement, such as about how the object of desire is replaceable. Fundamentally, what is shown in a film is not coincidental like everyday life; it is based on the filmmaker's intentions and should be relevant in some way.

Search for meaning and objectives of communication: the possibilities for deviation from reality are by no means arbitrary. Viktor Shklovsky pointed out the fact that 'Alienation can be found almost everywhere there is an image', as 'the aim of the image is not bringing its meaning closer to our understanding, but creating a special perception of the object so that it is "seen" and not "recognized"' (Shklovsky 1965: 3–24). This means that an essential objective of the representation of characters is to 'defamiliarise' perception and focus attention on certain aspects of the human. For this reason, characters tend to differ from real people on a principal level. Knowing pragmatic rules, communicative contexts, and conventions is necessary to recognise the meaning of these differences. Shklovsky mentions an instance of defamiliarisation in Tolstoy's work, the narrator's perception of a scene from an opera:

The people, with something like daggers in their hands, started to wave their arms. Then still more people came running out and began to drag away the maiden who had been wearing a white dress but who now wore one of sky blue. They did not drag her off immediately, but sang with her for a long time before dragging her away. Three times they struck on something metallic behind the side scenes, and everyone got down on his knees and began to chant a prayer. (Shklovsky 1965: 16)

The fact that the characters and action are not understood is obviously a result of the fact that the observer failed to grasp the communicative framework and did not possess the necessary media-specific knowledge.

Perspectivisation and mediation through narrating instances: at the same time, these examples clearly show the dependency of the depicted beings, the redhead and the maiden in the opera, on a narrating instance that does not permit direct social perception, instead filtering, perspectivising, and altering the information. In film too, many characters are mediated through the perspectives of narrative instances or imaginative agents—some of them unreliable. For example, near the end of *Fight*

Club, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) is surprisingly revealed to be a hallucination of the protagonist and first-person narrator (Edward Norton). Furthermore, the represented world and its residents differ from the real world in terms of their visual and acoustic perspectivisation: film characters are normally filmed frontally, and their dialogues are filtered from ambient noise and emphasised.

In addition to such general frameworks, character reception differs from social perception most importantly in that it can make use of extensive *bodies of knowledge specific to forms of narration, genres, or media* (in this case, knowledge should be understood to include implicit, procedural knowledge and affective dispositions). Mental representations taken from viewers' memories become part of the character model. When entering a theatre, many viewers already have extensive foreknowledge of characters; for example, because they are familiar with literary adaptations or sequels, have seen posters or trailers, or read reviews. Several different kinds of media knowledge play a role here.

Knowledge about the creators and the circumstances of production must be mentioned here. This can involve film stars or auteurs and their aesthetic objectives, institutions and production companies, film movements, historical styles, or censorship regulations. Knowledge about the actors is a crucial element (see Dyer 1999; Tal-Or et al. 2021).⁶¹ They not only embody characters in a sensuous and concrete manner, their star image often influences perception and comprehension. On the basis of Humphrey Bogart's and Ingrid Bergman's star images, many viewers expect that Rick Blaine and Ilsa Lund will become involved in a romance, though not necessarily with a happy ending. The fact that John Travolta represents coolness makes the criminal Vincent Vega in *Pulp Fiction* appear even cooler; the fact that Travolta made disco movies in the past predestines Vega to be the winner of the twist dance contest. Of course, such complements to the character model in the form of star image work only with characters played by famous actors and viewers familiar with them.

Star typologies group actors according to the types of characters they typically play, e.g., Clara Bow as a 'flapper', Katharine Hepburn as a 'good buddy', Brigitte Bardot as a 'nymphet' (see Patalas 1967). This points to another aspect of media-specific knowledge: how a great number of characters are understood is influenced by *intertextual and transmedial knowledge about character types, genres, and individual popular characters*. In contrast to the prototypes and stereotypes of social cognition, character types are acquired and applied through contact with media. Their spectrum is immense. Cinema can adopt typologies from the entire narrative tradition, e.g., 'the stereotypical characters in comedies of manners, from Plautus to *commedia dell'arte* and Molière (*miles gloriosus*, Pantalone, Dottore, etc.), black romanticism and light comedy' (Koch 1991: 139). Archetypal character categories can be found in a variety of contexts and periods, e.g., the braggart or imposter (*alazon*), or the ironic character without illusions who

61 Nurit Tal-Or and colleagues (2021) have found empirical evidence that viewers' knowledge about actors' real lives influences their responses to characters played by these actors.

understands his own abilities (*eirôn*; Koch 1991: 141–42, quoting Frye). Film can also make use of typologies from the visual arts. The exhibition ‘Weibsbilder’ at Hamburg’s art museum (22 September 2000–25 March 2001) distinguished various (stereo-)types in the depiction of women in works by Cranach to Picasso, for example the mother, the working woman, the prostitute, the eternal seductress, the muse, the model, and the sufferer. These types also involve iconographic characteristics that re-appear in films.

Important also is the area of *genre-specific* types. Western heroes are male, courageous and taciturn, skilful with horses and guns; the femme fatale employs her attractiveness as an instrument of power to hurt others. Various scholarly works deal with the typologies in specific genres. For example, Randy Loren Rasmussen (1998) examines the classic horror film and its heroes, innocent heroines, monsters, wise old men, mad scientists, and their assistants. Green (1991) differentiates literary adventure tales according to their characteristic protagonists: the Robinson Crusoe, the Three Musketeers, the Frontiersman, the Avenger, the Wanderer, the Sagaman, and the Hunted Man. At times, some genre types are linked to individual popular characters as models: many detectives resemble Sherlock Holmes’ acuity and eccentricities; many action heroes are similar to James Bond. However, more general genre knowledge that goes beyond the traits of individual characters or character types is relevant for character reception: as soon as we identify a film as a crime thriller, comedy, melodrama, etc., certain expectations of the characters, their relationships, their environments, and their fates arise. Genres promise particular experiences and involve implicit communicative agreements; for example, we know that we not only can laugh at the characters in a comedy, the filmmakers and our fellow viewers expect us to do so. It would be surprising if this had no effect on the construction of the character model and our emotional relationship to the represented being.

Knowledge about characters’ dramaturgical functions and plot roles: from the filmmakers’ perspective, characters serve certain structural and dramatic functions within the narrative (see Chapter 9 and Chapter 10). Some examples are: providing information, making a situation more authentic or emotional, providing comic relief, inviting empathy or identification, or serving as a comparison or contrast to other characters, most importantly in terms of action. In stories, characters assume a certain position in a system of general plot roles, such as ‘subject’, ‘opponent’, or ‘helper’ (Greimas 1972). When viewers recognise such functions, it enables them to make conclusions concerning the character’s traits and behaviour, at the same time stimulating expectations, attributions, and emotional dispositions; in other words, they steer the formation of character models. When, for example, viewers realise that a character is a protagonist or antagonist, this significantly limits the field of the traits and behaviours they expect.

Knowledge about representational and production techniques can also affect the development of the character model; for example, photography, lighting, and type of makeup can be

used not only to shape the perception of a character in subtle ways, they can also be conspicuous enough to direct different amounts of attention to the various members in a group of characters. Complex special effects such as morphing are used in numerous films so that the viewer knows in advance how a character will change.

Media dispositions play an important role even with the characters of classical Hollywood cinema, such as Rick Blaine. When we watch *Casablanca* in a theatre, we know that we are unable to intervene in a fictional story, and we try to grasp the film's communicative meaning and Rick's contribution to it. This black-and-white film with mediocre sound differs from the stimuli provided by reality (we are unable to tell the colour of Rick's eyes). Rick and the other characters differ from real people, for example because they always speak in highly informative, well-formulated, and concise sentences. The cinematography emphasises Rick's role as a protagonist and figure of identification, and because of this fact, it is unlikely that he will betray Ilsa and Laszlo to the Nazis. Rick is played by Humphrey Bogart, who was familiar to the viewers of the time, from playing tough characters in gangster and detective genres, so they were able to link the appropriate associations with this role. Many of them also knew about the censorship regulations of the Motion Picture Production Code and the ban on depictions of sex; in other words, they were aware of the necessity of circumventing by means of indirect references and innuendo and could guess that Rick and Ilsa have a sexual encounter even though this is not shown explicitly. Some more complex conclusions are also conceivable: it can hardly be overlooked that *Casablanca* took a political stance against the Nazis and supported the United States entering the Second World War. This also suggests that Rick as the protagonist has a good heart deep down and will undergo a relevant change.

To summarise, character reception differs from social perception in that a wide variety of the viewers' media dispositions can influence how their mental representations of represented beings develop. Some of these dispositions are specific to film, such as the viewing situation in a theatre and knowledge about the actors, director, conventions of depiction, genres, and production methods. Other dispositions involve more general areas of the narrative (e.g., plot roles), media communication (consciousness of fiction), or communication in general (pragmatic conventions).

Thus, the character model is a *hybrid construction*. Character synthesis is grounded in social cognition, but at the same time in knowledge relating to media and communicative goals. When we develop mental representations of a represented being and its characteristics, our reception processes correspond to the social perception of real people in many ways, but we also make use of media-specific knowledge and orient ourselves according to communicative rules and objectives. The relative importance of the factors that influence the construction of a character model varies significantly. Some films minimise the use of media dispositions to seem more realistic, while in others, media knowledge can play a significant role, making us consciously aware of the character's artificial nature (such as in postmodernist or experimental

works). Even a character synthesis with considerable input of media-specific factors has a fundamental and irreducible analogy to the social perception of real people; otherwise, constructing a character model would not be possible.

The interaction of social dispositions and media dispositions calls attention to another difficulty involved with character analysis. Character models can be considered intersubjective solely to the extent to which the viewers' cognitive-affective predispositions are intersubjective.⁶² All film analyses include at the very least implicit beliefs concerning the filmmaker's and viewers' mental dispositions. Creating a precise basis for analysis requires determination of the dispositions relevant for each question (depending on whether questions are asked about the creators' intentions or how a certain viewer group actually perceived or perceives it). Some social and media dispositions are presumably valid across different cultures and time periods. Examples of social dispositions are the person schema, the ability to feel empathy, and the recognition of certain emotional expressions. General communication rules, awareness of communication and fiction, the relevance principle, and the search for meaning also seem to be broadly intersubjective. On the other hand, it is obvious that most social and media dispositions differ according to time period, culture, social milieu, and social group. More specific results of research on social perception so far refer primarily to viewers in modern Western societies. With viewers from other eras and cultures, their specific forms of social cognition must be taken into account. For this purpose, historical reconstruction, discourse analysis, or the field of cultural studies, for example, can be employed and methods in relevant fields of cultural study, such as ethnology, historical anthropology, and the history of ideas, can be consulted.⁶³

5.4 Modes of Constructing Character Models: Typification and Individualisation

An aspect which was hinted at in the section about social categorisation, and which is of central importance for character synthesis should be mentioned again. A significant part of social and media dispositions consist of categories, prototypes, or stereotypes that bundle supposed characteristics of certain social groups. Germans are blunt, hard-working, aggressive, lack a sense of humour, dress in a down-to-earth manner, eat sausage and drink beer. Artists are delicate, sensitive, mentally unstable dreamers, and dress carelessly. Mothers are plump, conservative, married, devoted, loving, uneducated, unsexy, and work as housewives. A German single mother and artist might not fit any of these categories especially well. The fact that we categorise and typify humans and characters has far-reaching effects on our reactions to them, and many categories have an

62 For the field of literary studies, see Jannidis 2004; Grabes 1978: 412–13. Since cinematic history is limited to the modern era, this represents a somewhat smaller problem than for literature.

63 See, for example, Staiger 1992; Dyer 1999; Ang 1990; in the field of literary studies, see Barsch and Hejl 2000: 7–90; Schneider 2000: 173–210.

implicit connection to our own identity. Once again: 'The simplest and most far-reaching form of categorisation is the judgment of whether individuals are like us' (Zimbardo and Gerrig 1999: 436). In similar ways as real people, characters are either assigned to a category or type and perceived as members of a group, or are regarded as individuals with unique traits. As Schneider (2000) and other authors have shown, the development of character models can lie between these poles of typification (or categorisation) and individualisation (or personalisation, decategorisation).⁶⁴

Typification (categorisation): when encountering a character, viewers normally first attempt to assign them to a certain category or type. This will work if the film provides information about the character that corresponds to an existing (proto)type and fits into the category.⁶⁵ In this case, a character model is constructed very quickly, primarily on the basis of existing memory contents. As mentioned above, we categorise real people according to their group membership, social role, and personality, among other things. In the case of characters, these elements are joined by the archetypes and stereotypes of media and narrative genres (Western hero, femme fatale; see Chapter 8) as well as schemata that are specific for individual films and formed through the repetition of certain motifs. Along with the type or category, an associative network it belongs to is activated. Viewers draw conclusions, form hypotheses and expectations concerning the character and its behaviour, and develop certain affective attitudes to it. The result is a 'category-based' character model (Gerrig and Allbritton 1990).

Individualisation (personification, decategorisation): when the film, on the other hand, complicates or hinders the application of existing categories or typologies, recipients must construct an individualised character model. The character is then regarded not merely as belonging to a certain category, but as an individual. In this case, a model is constructed primarily from the bottom-up, on the basis of specific information provided by the film, rather than top-down from general categories and mental prototypes. The character model remains open for some time, and the viewer depends on receiving more extensive information about the character. Behavioural expectations are also more open-ended, and the character seems 'round' or 'multidimensional'.

Typification and individualisation are poles of a continuum (Culpeper 2000), and a common intermediate stage is an individualised type: a type is offered and accepted, but then modified based on additional information that fails to match it precisely. The

64 See, among other authors, Tan 1996: 163–67; Gerrig and Allbritton 1990; Culpeper 2000; Zimbardo and Gerrig 1999: 436; the most comprehensive of which is Schneider 2000: Chapter 4. Schneider speaks of 'categorisation' and 'personalisation'; he regards 'individualisation' as a subsequent differentiation of typified characters. I use the other terms because they seem to be more common and less prone to being misunderstood. On strategies of multiple categorisation to counter stereotyping, see Brylla 2023.

65 Which categories are activated depends on, in addition to the context, which cognitive processes have just gone on or have been channelled by repetition and habituation, and the purpose of the observation, e.g., whether the viewer empathizes with the character or is trying to predict their behaviour.

image of the character will be developed further. A number of screenwriting guides such as Seger's *Creating Unforgettable Characters* (1990) advise using this mixture of typification and individualisation; characters should conform to a type and be easily comprehensible as a result, but at the same time they should be individualised by specific features so as to be more realistic and interesting.

The typified character model can be constructed more quickly and economically in terms of cognitive effort, while the individualised character model is more demanding, complex, and varied. Whether recipients choose the more difficult individualisation depends, firstly, on their motivation, the level of their interest in the character, and the perceived degree of relevance. Secondly, this choice depends on the information provided. If the available information cannot be categorised easily, other forms of processing are chosen (Culpeper 2000: 297). Which form of model construction the viewer selects determines whether a character is perceived as a type or an individual; the stability of expectations regarding its behaviour; how quickly it is grasped, evaluated, and classified; the amount of attention it receives; and the viewer's willingness to empathise with the character.

In many cases, protagonists are individualised while secondary characters and antagonists are typified. In Nanni Moretti's *La stanza del figlio/The Son's Room*, for example, the main characters (the family members) are individualised. Swift categorisation is made impossible by the fact that they fail to match a certain type clearly. The protagonist, Giovanni (Moretti), does not fit into any category because he is shown in a wide variety of situations and roles (while playing sports, on the job, as a lover, and as a father), and viewers are repeatedly surprised. The other main characters are also constantly developed further and made more complex. Giovanni's psychiatric patients, on the other hand, are shown solely while in therapy, as a result of which they can immediately be categorised as one of various types of neurotics. By portraying its characters in these two different ways, the film effectively intensifies its tragicomic mood. The result is constant tension between the distanced amusement toward the caricatured patients and empathy with the family and their grieving over the sudden death of the son and brother.

Typification and individualisation are dynamic processes. The processing of information can take one of three paths after the initial perception and typification:⁶⁶ Firstly, the initial categorisation can be confirmed by additional information. Secondly, the character can be recategorised when the additional information does not fit, though it matches a different one, or a subcategory of the first. And thirdly, the character can be perceived in an individualised manner when the information fails to accord with any of the available categories and the viewer attempts to create a context of meaning that binds the character's traits through piecemeal integration of information.

One example of the transformation of a typified character into an individualised one is Oscar, one of the patients. At first, Oscar (Silvio Orlando) fits perfectly into

66 Modified after Culpeper 2000: 297–98; see also Schneider 2000: 163.

the category of the comic depressive hypochondriac. His sole action is lamenting his woes while on the psychiatrist's couch. But then there is a contradiction. It turns out that Oscar is, in fact, seriously ill. The way in which he deals with his cancer makes his characterisation multidimensional. Instead of merely accepting the situation, he battles his illness with a sense of humour, proving himself to be stronger than expected. After Giovanni—out of irrational despair—blames him for his son's death, Oscar demonstrates understanding for his therapist and decides to terminate treatment, claiming that Giovanni has cured him. The character's process of personal maturation and physical healing is accompanied by a process of the character continuously gaining depth and complexity at the level of representation, once the first assignment to a type has shown to be false.

Such developments in the understanding of other persons or characters become even more important in social contexts of stereotyping and discrimination. In social psychology, there is a rich literature on 'decategorisation' and related strategies to counter stereotyping and stigmatisation in intergroup relations (for an overview, see Voci 2010). Catalin Brylla (2023) describes several strategies in documentary films, with a focus on the relations between viewers' self-categorisation and their understanding of characters. One strategy is 'cross-categorisation', suggesting multiple distinct categories in a surprising combination, incompatible with dominant stereotypes, and connecting characters otherwise perceived as members of marginalised out-groups with the viewers' in-group and social identity. For instance, a character may be shown to be both a wheelchair user and a traveller. A second strategy is the 'recategorisation' of out-group characters by way of introducing a new, more encompassing category which both the viewers and characters belong to. For instance, in *Moonlight* the protagonist's mentor is first shown as a drug dealer and then as a loving parent. The third strategy of 'decategorisation' corresponds to what was called individualisation above: the character shows so many diverse characteristics that it cannot be sorted into a few categories but must be understood bottom-up as a specific individual.

In conclusion, character models can develop in different ways, on a spectrum between typification and individualisation. Some characters can be categorised and typified easily, and as a result are immediately assigned traits and trigger certain expectations. In contrast, individualised characters resist simple categorisation; their traits and behavioural dispositions can be inferred only gradually. Distinguishing between typification and individualisation makes fundamentally different kinds of character synthesis clear and contributes to explaining why reactions to characters vary. The contrasts between individualisation and typification and the significance of mental dispositions for character synthesis will be taken up again in later chapters (especially 8, 10, and 11). After examining how represented beings are comprehended and experienced, the next chapter will now deal more closely with the question of which traits represented beings have and which concepts can be employed for analysing them.

6. Analysing Represented Beings: An Anthropological Heuristic

6.1 Overview: Grasping Represented Beings

While characters are perceived as represented beings, symbols, symptoms, and artefacts, the first of these aspects is of fundamental importance and is normally given the most attention. The basic question is then how one can systematically analyse characters as represented (and often fictional) beings. This chapter summarises the findings on this topic thus far and brings a broad spectrum of analytic concepts from different disciplines together into a heuristic model.

This requires untangling two interrelated problems. The first can be found in structural description and conceptual decisions. When, for example, I try to describe Rick Blaine comprehensively as a fictional person, then I have to decide which kinds of traits to consider and which concepts to use. To what extent, for example, is it legitimate to go beyond the explicit information provided by the film when analysing Rick's inner life? And which—psychoanalytic, folk-psychological, contemporary, or historical—concepts should I employ when describing it?

As we have seen in the last chapter (the key results of which are briefly summarised here), such questions can only be answered by taking reception into account, by reconstructing which mental representations of Rick the filmmakers or recipients (should) have. In order to choose suitable categories and describe characters adequately, we need to be aware of how we develop mental representations of them. For this reason, the following considerations begin with reception. Their methodical starting point is the assumption that viewers construct character models: complex, vivid representations of beings such as Rick who populate the represented world.

A character model is a dynamic system of sensory-analogue and propositional representations of a creature and its features (see Chapter 5). Over the course of a film, a back and forth ensues between perception and imaginative completion, between long and short-term memory. For example, at the beginning of *Casablanca*, I first take in linguistic evidence such as the sign 'Rick's Café Americain' and the statement 'Everybody comes to Rick's', conclude on that basis that Rick is a successful nightclub owner, and possibly associate additional traits such as intelligence or glamour. When

Rick is discussed by his guests later on and then appears, I can activate the complex of traits stored in my memory and combine them with new ones. At this moment, the character model is present in the working memory, and it can later slide back into the background of consciousness. When the film ends, viewers have a certain character model in their memory until it fades or is developed further. The character model is condensed and simplified in comparison to the breadth of information that a film lets us perceive. However, it is not just a set of abstract propositions, but a system that includes mental imagery and other analogous representations.

An analysis can examine both the final character model and the process of its gradual development, the character synthesis. When doing so, different modes of character reception can be reconstructed: either the character reception intended by the filmmakers, or the empirical reception of certain (groups of) viewers, or the ideal reception of an optimally successful communication. In any case, three aspects are of central importance:

- the kinds of *traits* that are represented in the character model;
- the formal *structures* in the arrangement of these traits in the model; and
- the *factors* involved in the construction of character models that affect their structure.

These points provide a foundation for analysing characters as represented beings (and make a start on analysing them as artefacts, symbols, and symptoms).

The content of the character model comprises the represented being's traits and relationships. They can be organised into four linked areas that partially overlap:

- body (physical characteristics and processes);
- psyche (inner life and personality);
- sociality (constant positions and fleeting relations); and
- behaviour (habitual and situational).

The differentiation between body and mind can be found throughout human cultural history and everyday understanding. The areas of sociality and behaviour intricately combine physical and psychological aspects, and there are further reasons to consider them separately: from a theoretical perspective, their relationship to the represented being's outer and shared worlds; from a pragmatic perspective, their particular significance for human self-understanding and narrative. All four areas comprise both stable and fleeting traits in the character's past (biography), present, and future. Physical form and abilities, personality, social position, and behavioural habitus are relatively stable; temporary physical states, mental processes, social interactions, and situational behaviour are rather fleeting. The following table contains a few more examples, and behaviour is integrated into the other areas.

	1. Physical	2. Mental	3. Social
A. Stable traits	A1. Physical dispositions, e.g., species, build, age, sex, location	A2. Mental dispositions, e.g., personality, self-concept	A3. Social positions and relations within a social structure, e.g., roles, group membership, relationships, occupation, status
B. Fleeting states	B1. Temporary bodily states, e.g., external actions, movement in space, illness, clothing, facial expressions	B2. Mental processes (e.g., sensations, thoughts, feelings) and momentary states (e.g., plans, lack of concentration)	B3. Social behaviour, e.g., interactions, conflicts, communication

Table 6 Characters' stable traits and fleeting states in the areas of physicality, psyche, and sociality

So, a character model is a system of mental representations about a represented being's traits, whereby 'traits' refers in a broad sense to all types of physical, mental, social, and behaviour-related attributes and relations, whether constant or variable and whether they are in the story's past, present, or future. The being's traits are not just a loose bundle, but a dynamic system; they are linked in a network of causal connections or associative inferences. The character model's structure develops gradually. Both character models and the beings they represent change over time. For example, sometimes, viewers can recognise at a film's end that a previous mental representation of a character was misleading because information was held back.

When constructing the character model, viewers can employ explicitly represented traits to draw conclusions about other characteristics in the same or other areas, e.g., from a perceived personality trait to other mental, physical, or social features. In the case of Rick Blaine, for example, first we learn a bit about his social position as a successful nightclub owner, which suggests personality traits that are then confirmed by Rick's appearance and, in part, by his behaviour. At the same time, there are other main directions of abductive inferences: from the perceptible to the imperceptible, from the exterior to the interior, from stable characteristics to fleeting processes, and from situational actions to complex motives and long-term character traits.

Basically, there are four interacting factors or sources of information that provide the input for drawing conclusions and creating a character model: the viewers' perception of the film, their social dispositions (including their self-model), their media dispositions, and more specific dispositions generated by the individual film.

At first, the character model underlies the perception of the film—a temporally structured system of audiovisual stimuli—that takes place in a specific situation. For example, I can watch *Casablanca* in my home cinema with certain intentions, such as relaxing or analysing the classic film as closely as possible. Information is taken in visually and acoustically, then processed further. In doing so, I employ various types of psychophysical dispositions that influence my perception of the film and enable me to make use of the various bits of information, organise them, and put them all in relation.

This involves dispositions of social perception/cognition, or put briefly, social dispositions. Expressed in simplified terms, they are the memory contents and response tendencies that play a role in the assessment of real people, the lion's share of which are acquired when dealing with one's social environment (including parents and peers). This includes the general person schema and ideas about human nature; social categories, prototypes and stereotypes; knowledge about patterns of social behaviour, groups, and roles; autonomous dynamics of social cognition, attribution, and behavioural interpretation; and knowledge of (and affective attitudes to) specific persons. With non-human beings, some other dispositions come into play, e.g., folk-zoological knowledge (Wiblé 2024); humans are, however, the most complex, which is why I concentrate on them here. These dispositions often suggest going beyond the information provided explicitly in the film and imputing more extensive trait constellations or certain associations to the character. In the case of a casino owner, we expect a combination of elegance, cleverness, a cosmopolitan attitude, cold bloodedness, loose morals, etc.

Amongst the social dispositions, the individual viewer's self-model should be emphasised. This involves the mental representations they have of themselves extending from the physical to the emotional and on to consciously reflected matters (see Metzinger 1999, 2004; Newen 2015). Various theories explicitly or implicitly invoke aspects of the self-model's role in character reception. Psychoanalytical approaches refer to the projection of the viewer's own traits onto characters. Evolution theorists speak of mental and physical simulation of the character's experience through the observer. In film phenomenology, recipients are considered 'surrogate bodies' (Voss 2011) for films and their characters. Cultural studies, on the other hand, emphasises the aspect of social identity, in other words, one's self-assignment to certain social groups. The self-model unites all these aspects: body schemata, affects, interests, and identities. In both film and everyday life, it functions as a point of departure for both conclusions about others based on oneself and siding with someone in such a way that excludes others.

However, viewers are normally aware that they are watching film characters rather than real beings. For this reason, their perception and information processing is also influenced by mental assumptions concerning media communication—or, more briefly, media dispositions. These include awareness of communication and fiction; the orientation toward communicative rules and objectives; and media-specific knowledge of genres, narrative styles, character types, dramaturgical functions, formal conventions, star images, the circumstances of production and distribution, intertextual reference objects, and popular characters. For example, one could remember Humphrey Bogart's role in *The Maltese Falcon* and on that basis assume that Rick Blaine is also a tough guy with a good heart, or one could suspect from the very beginning that Rick will give up his cynical attitude because he is the story's hero and is played by a star. In the course of the film, text-specific dispositions can also be established, an example being the

tendency to react to the musical leitmotif 'As Time Goes By' with feelings of empathy.

Thus, the viewers' social, medial, and film-based dispositions allow them to draw conclusions about further characteristics that are not portrayed explicitly, since they can extrapolate from perceivable traits. For example, folk-psychological knowledge can be used to explain inner motives (e.g., traumas in the past) on the basis of external actions (e.g., outbursts in tears or anger), and media knowledge (e.g., conventional behavioural explanations in the film) can steer this process. Thus, Rick's cynicism can be explained in light of the traumatic end of his affair with Ilsa. Inferences about a being's traits are also influenced by their various contexts (see Chapter 9 and Chapter 10 for more). Some of the most important of them are the character's environment, which shapes perception and potential actions, the events that take place in this world, and the character's position within a constellation of similarities, contrasts, and relationships with others. For example, Rick's attractiveness increases because his lover Ilsa is a beautiful woman admired by everyone, and his financial disinterest puts him above the greed of Ugarte and other contrasting characters.

The mental factors involved in model construction play a role in determining the character model's content. During character reception, various factors interact: the viewers' perception of the film; social-, media-, and film-specific dispositions; self-models; and contextual knowledge. However, the influence of each varies. In addition, not all the information taken in while watching a film is of equal value. The first and last bits tend to be more important. The first impression colours the subsequent view of the character (primacy effect, priming), while the final impression affects the final character model (recency effect). Information that contradicts previous impressions, social stereotypes and biases in particular, is reinterpreted or ignored in order to avoid contradictions (cognitive dissonance). A conspicuous trait can provide a foundation for suppositions about an entire series of other characteristics (halo effect). Assumptions about the character's personality are suggested primarily by focused, unambiguous, and unusual behaviour in a variety of situations, but there is already a general tendency to attribute a character's behaviour to their personality rather than their situation (fundamental attribution error).

In order to explain the development of the character model and of the character completely, it would be necessary to reconstruct this interaction of variously important pieces of information in the order it occurs. However, the complexity and the problematic nature or lack of sufficient data limits this. In most cases, though, fairly general clues about these factors are adequate to make plausible statements about characters. They provide arguments to support explanations of the reception of represented beings and analytic statements about them that go beyond explicit depictions in the film.

The relevance of proceeding in this way can, for example, be made clear by the question of when a character is racist. Thus, it has been claimed that the depiction of Süß Oppenheimer in Veit Harlan's fascist and inflammatory film *Jud Süß* is, considered in and of itself, objectively neutral or at least ambivalent and does not immediately imply a negative view of the character

(Lohmeier 1996). Even if this were the case, a look at the dispositions of contemporary viewers shows the anti-Semitism to be unmistakable. The character's traits depend on more than just explicit depictions in the film, as the target audience's assumptions play a role too. The filmmakers could take for granted that a majority of German viewers were already influenced by the everyday and media stereotypes of anti-Semitism. Instead of regarding the character ambivalently, their view would be clearly negative (and would further support their disposition) because of stereotypical attitudes. Moreover, viewers could assume that the filmmakers *intended* the character to be understood in precisely this way. In this sense, Oppenheimer would be an unambiguously antisemitic character in spite of an 'objective' ambivalence of the filmic text (which, by the way, I consider doubtful) because a link to an antisemitic body of 'knowledge' was to be expected in the communicative situation.

However, considering the various factors and processes involved in the construction of mental models is important not only for analysis in terms of content, but also structure. The character's traits are arranged and interrelated in a certain way in the model, giving it its specific form. This structure plays an essential role in analysing the character as an artefact and in particular in criticism of its aesthetic success. I will deal with this matter in greater detail in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, limiting myself here to a few fundamentals that are important for understanding the character as a represented being, since they once again remind us of the difference between mental representations of characters conveyed by media and those relating to real people:

- Amount and level of detail: films convey information about various amounts of character traits, enabling viewers to draw conclusions concerning further characteristics to varying degrees. For this reason, character models are more or less comprehensive, rich in content, detailed and elaborated, and as a result, main characters such as Rick have more attributes than secondary characters such as the piano player, Sam.
- Selectivity, dimensionality, and focus: the traits that are perceived and inferred come from various areas relating to physicality, psyche, sociality, and behaviour. As a result, some aspects are emphasised while others are left out or marginalised. The character can be considered one-dimensional or multidimensional, depending on how many fields of characteristics are represented. In many cases, certain cardinal characteristics represent a focus of attention, surrounded by a periphery of other characteristics that receive less interest. Rick's love of Ilsa occupies the central position and his past is merely hinted at, creating a mysterious gap, while his experiences in early childhood go unmentioned and are apparently irrelevant.
- Coherence and consistency: a character's traits are related to one another, form a more or less tight network, and are (psycho)logically more or less coherent. Characters may be (in)coherent in various regards, in that their characteristics, e.g., their behaviour and motives, are linked causally, associatively, or in some other way. In addition, this trait structure is more or less consistent; characters

can possess contradictory characteristics and a psychologically, physically, or even logically impossible structure. For example, psychological inconsistencies can appear when the character's personality traits and behaviours contradict each other from a folk-psychological perspective (Rick's character as a cynic who was disappointed by life was—rather unconvincingly—considered inconsistent because he enjoyed a variety of alcoholic drinks; cf. Smith 2003: 159). Incoherence and inconsistency can also be employed intentionally to generate alienation, disruption of perception or defamiliarisation, or for purposes of deconstruction.

- **Typification and individualisation:** the constellation of traits in a character model can more or less coincide with social and media prototypes and the stereotypes that viewers have in their memory (Schneider 2000: Chapter 4; Brylla 2023: Chapter 7). A typified character can be understood quickly, but might seem artificial, boring, or discriminatory. Characters that break away from existing categories, schemata, and types require more detailed examination.
- **Simplicity and complexity:** when a few consistently represented traits correspond to a type, a character seems relatively simple, while its complexity increases along with the degree of detail, deviation from a type, or contradiction.
- **Modality, mediality, and perspectivity:** traits in the character model are represented in various modes and perspectives. The model is more or less sensual-perceptual or abstract, which can relate to the medium involved and the way in which it conveys information, among other factors. For example, Rick's appearance and his affair with Ilsa in Paris are conceived in a primarily visual fashion, while the rest of his past history is presented mainly verbally. We mostly see him from outside, and only occasionally adopt his internal perspective. The character model's perspectivity is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 13.
- **Realism and artificiality:** some characters—even fantastic ones—seem realistic, while others leave an impression of being artificial, alienated, refracted. Viewers automatically evaluate character models in terms of various criteria of reality starting with immediate perceptual impressions. Depending on whether the film's audiovisual flow of signs corresponds to implicit criteria of realism in the perceptive apparatus or violates them (for more on this, see Grodal 1999: 19–38), characters are experienced as illusionistic or artificial (e.g., cartoon characters). When illusionistic characters conform to higher-level criteria of reality (such as expectations of 'normal' physical or psychological abilities), they are considered realistic (such as Michelangelo Antonioni's or Kelly Reichardt's psychologically

nuanced characters), or fantastic if not (such as Superman or the Alien). Some of the character model's structural aspects, such as typification, simplicity, incoherence, inconsistency, a low degree of detail, and conspicuous disruptions of modality, can contribute to the impression that the character is unrealistic. Increased use of media dispositions in character synthesis also makes characters seem artificial.

- Form of existence and plane of reality: Uri Margolin pointed out that some characters do not really exist in their fictional world, but are presented as counterfactual, hypothetical, or purely subjective ideas within that world (1995: 375). Some characters tell stories or have dreams or hallucinations in which other embedded characters appear. For example, a main character of *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden, proves to be a hallucinated alter ego of the protagonist. Considered from the perspective of reception, the mental models of such characters are connected to a meta-representational index, such as the idea that 'This character is only another character's invention'. At the same time, they can seem vividly real in the audiovisual depiction and be a focus of attention.
- Contextualisation and development: the structure of traits in character models is integrated into various other mental representations, some of which will be dealt with in subsequent chapters. These involve, for example, contexts on the level of the represented world (character constellations, situations, action), and also on the symbolic and thematic levels and that of communicative contexts in reality (self-model, star images, etc.). The character model can be given meta-representational indices that link it with narrating instances. Moreover, it changes to a greater or lesser degree in the course of time.

Thus, character models are—in a structural sense—more or less detailed, selective, dimensional, focused, coherent, consistent, typified, complex, vivid, realistic, and artificial; they are also perspectivised and contextualised, and develop in different ways. All this affects how viewers react to characters cognitively and affectively. The fascination exercised by characters is based not least on a peculiar kind of ambivalence. On the one hand, we react to them very similarly as to real (human) beings. We perceive their physical, psychological, and social traits, try to understand their behaviour, and experience feelings that involve them. On the other hand, we react to them also as media constructs that have been formed in a certain way, that convey meanings, and permit conclusions about communication processes. Each character can be placed closer to one or the other of the poles on this continuum and is more or less realistic or artificial, symbolic or symptomatic (see Chapter 4). Their ambivalent natures are, however, never completely lost. Even the most realistic characters are not mistaken for real people, and even the most artificial have traits possessed by real people. These thoughts will be taken up again in the Chapters 7 and 8 and will be presumed

in the following considerations, which focus on a character's traits as a represented being. Diagram 12 summarises the fundamentals of character synthesis described above.

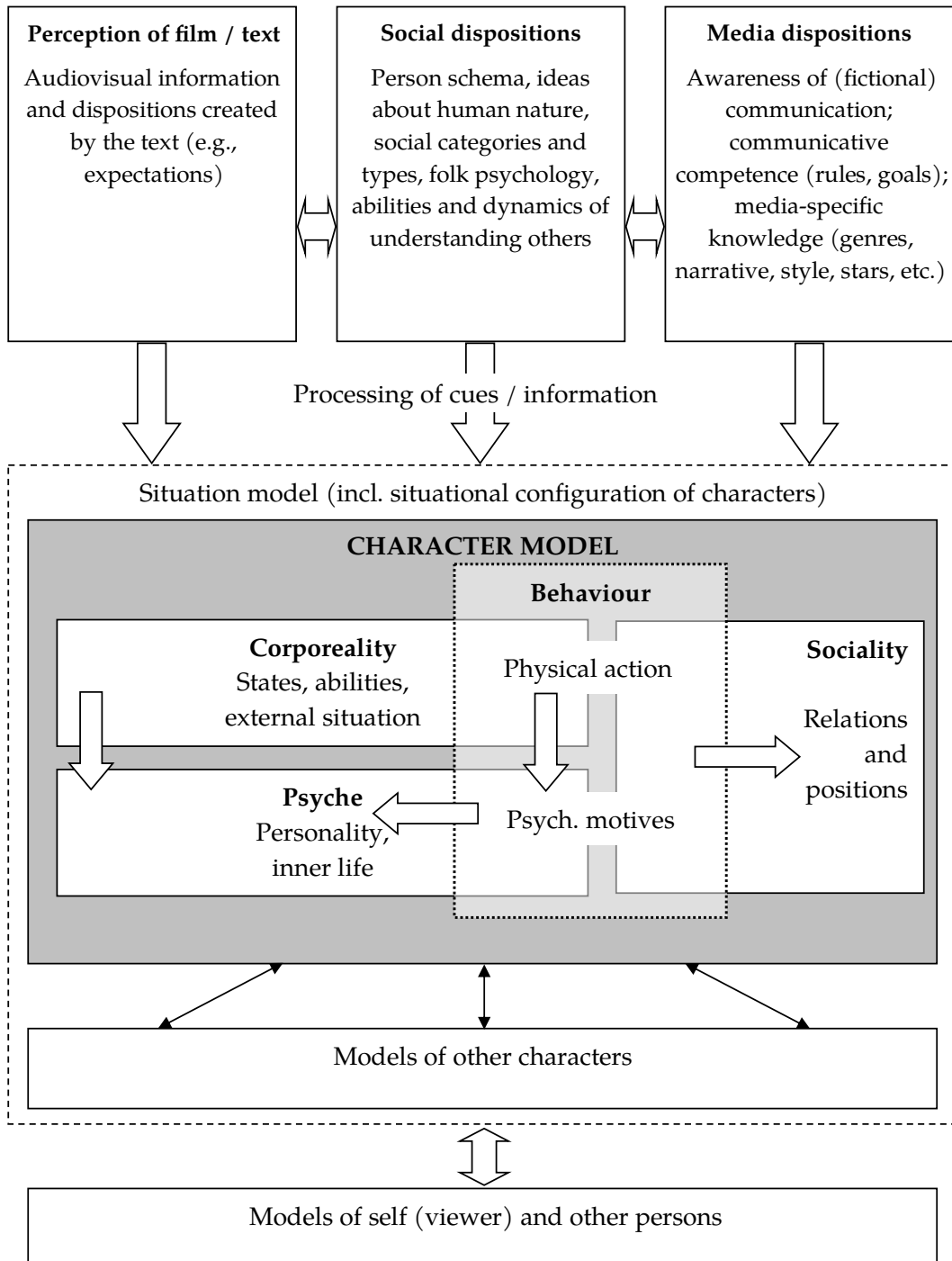


Diagram 12 Factors and elements of character synthesis

The approach outlined above leads to several advantages and consequences for character analysis. Firstly, it represents a heuristic and generally consensual starting point for descriptions of fictional characters: the four areas of physicality, psyche, sociality, and behaviour. In the course of this chapter, more nuanced categories for analysis will be included for each of these areas. A second consequence is that for reconstruction of characters' trait systems, the viewers' dispositions must be taken into account along with the audiovisual text, since in character synthesis one goes far beyond what is explicitly depicted with inferences and associations, particularly about psyche and sociality. While the process of analysis can be simplified for pragmatic reasons, one should remain conscious of one's own implicit assumptions. Awareness of the difference in mental dispositions that are manifested in characters points out that perception, thought, and one's own position are constructive and relative.

The focus on reception makes it possible to explain a number of central phenomena in a more exact manner. These include the viewers' cognitive and affective involvement; correspondences and differences in their reactions; the limits of purely subjective association; the question of how stereotyped characters are; their media specificity; the workings, salience, and relevance of textual characterisation devices; the discussion of artefact traits, such as whether characters are typical or multidimensional; the relationship between characters and the situations and events being depicted compared with real people; characters' reference to themes and indirect meanings; the temporal development of mental representations of characters; and the question of what this development means for the character as an 'ideal final product'.

The brief overview of character synthesis and its results provide a basis to answer the initial question: How can characters be analysed as represented beings? A basic matrix of traits can be identified as a preliminary result. We attribute physical, mental, social, and behavioural characteristics to characters, and these areas overlap to some extent. Characters differ from other elements of the represented world most importantly through their psychological processes, though at the same time these processes can be imputed to a wide variety of beings (see Diagram 13, Figure 1, Figure 9, Figure 10, and Figure 11), including:

- humans;
- non-human beings such as animals (Lassie) and plants (Audrey II in *The Little Shop of Horrors*);
- artificial beings such as machines, computers (HAL in Kubrick's *2001*), robots, androids (*I, Robot*; *Ex Machina*), and other animated objects; and also
- supernatural beings such as gods, demons, and angels.

Such categories that are established in reality or media tradition can also be varied, refracted or merged, such as hybrid forms of cyborgs, aliens, demigods, and monsters. Moreover, especially in fantastic or spiritual narratives, the same character may be ascribed different identities or ways of existence. For example, the titular character in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* appears as an old man on the verge of death, but in his past lives he seems to have been, among other things, a water buffalo and a princess

who mated with a talking catfish. His deceased wife returns as a translucent ghost, and his vanished son as a glowing-eyed monkey spirit. The protagonists in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* jump into several alternative versions of themselves that exist in parallel universes, and activate the abilities of their alter egos (e.g., as Kung Fu fighters) in their current reality. Universes branch out each time a character makes a decision, for instance, to marry or not.

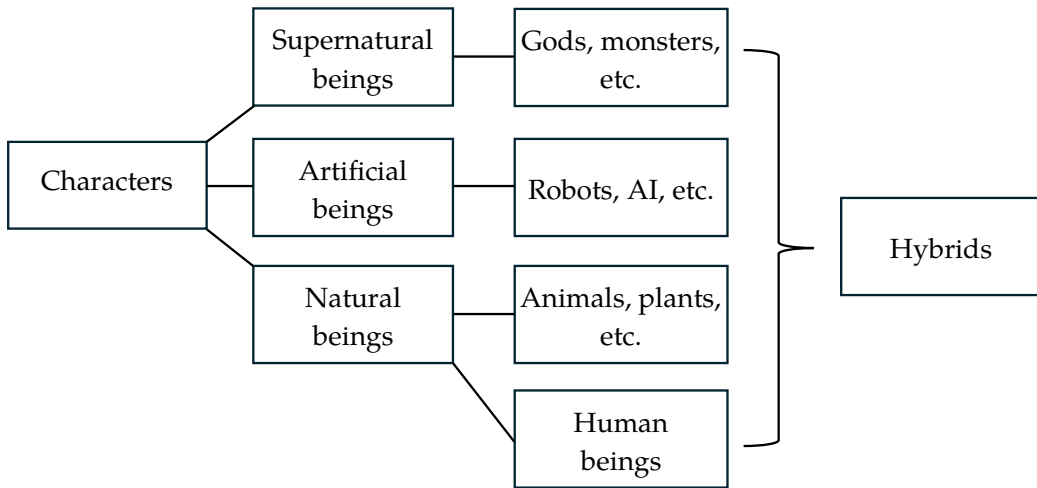


Diagram 13 Types of represented (fictional) beings



Fig. 9 Lassie and her master (Roddy McDowall) in *Lassie Come Home*. (Dir. Fred M. Wilcox, *Lassie Come Home*, 1943, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, USA. All rights reserved.)

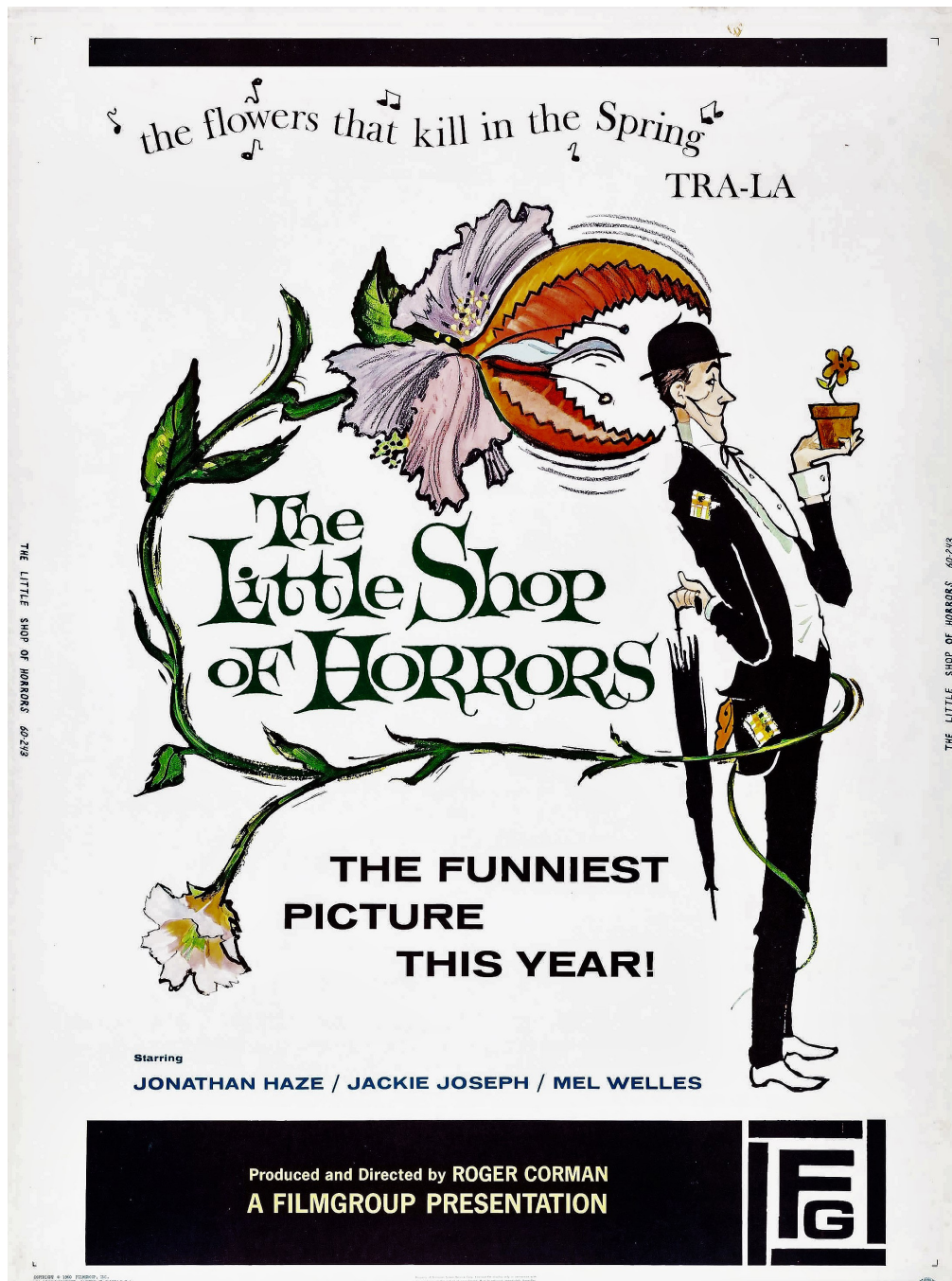


Fig. 10 The carnivorous plant, Audrey, is a main character in *The Little Shop of Horrors*—here the poster for Roger Corman's 1960 movie. (Dir. Roger Corman, *The Little Shop of Horrors*, 1960, The Film Group/Santa Clara Productions, USA)

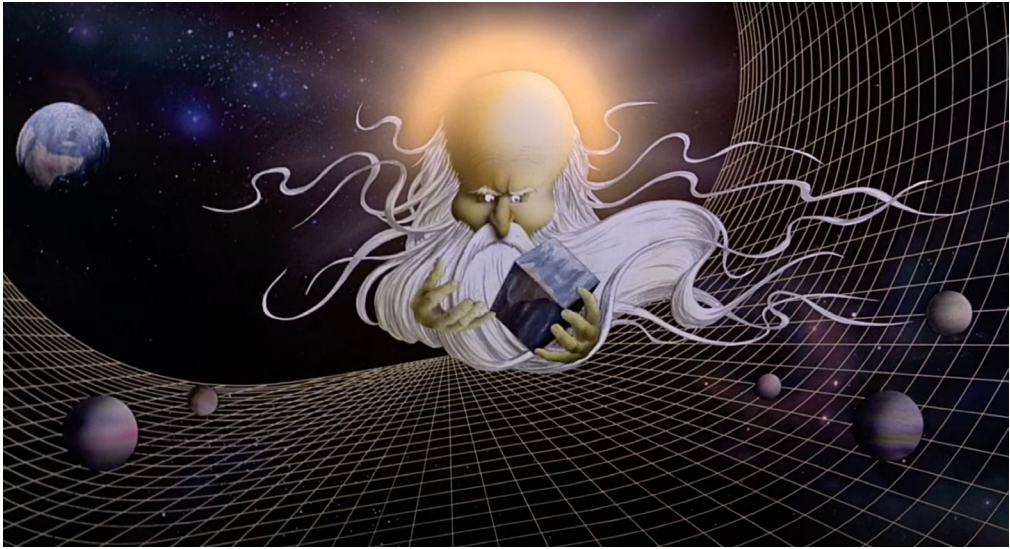


Fig. 11 In *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*, God discards our round planet Earth in favour of a cubic one. (Dir. Terry Jones, *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*, 1983, Celandine Films/Python (Monty) Pictures, UK. All rights reserved.)

Characters can therefore deviate far from a naturalistic or scientific understanding of human beings. Nevertheless, character models are most often based on the mental schema of human persons. Persons are the subject of mental episodes; refer to themselves; are aware of their own temporal existence; and are capable of logical and instrumental rationality, communication, and recognition of others as persons, and they possess a certain personality and identity (see Quante 2002: 19–23). Since the principle of anthropomorphism applies to characters in the same way as in reality, and other beings are often treated as humans in many ways and would fit into the most complex categories, the following description concentrates on the equivalents of human persons.

A basic challenge of analysing represented beings consists in choosing suitable concepts and heuristics. Characters are often portrayed indirectly, and even explicit depictions must be paraphrased. Concepts are needed to express character traits in the form of language, and descriptions of a body or emotionality in everyday language quickly meet their limits. Which folk or scientific concepts can we then use to describe the body, psyche, sociality, and behaviour of characters in an exact way? The task involves not only employing precise language to express what is seen, heard, or inferred in a film, but also making the inferences comprehensible, explaining, or questioning them. Selecting among the wide variety of categories can have far-reaching consequences. They determine which kinds of traits can reasonably be attributed to characters; they stress or exclude certain aspects in the analysis; and they facilitate inferences and explanations of specific traits. As a result, different categories produce different results

in analysis, as will be shown by the variety of interpretations of Rick. The choice of suitable concepts also depends on the specific objective of analysis. Dramaturgical and sociocultural analyses are intended to reveal how characters *are actually* understood by empirical recipients in the past, present, or future; interpretative analyses, on the other hand, aim at how characters *should be* understood according to the filmmaker's intentions or according to criteria of successful communication. Because concepts and their suitability for various aims of analysis differ, it is necessary to choose them carefully and justify the choice. There are four basic alternatives:

- Intuitive folk concepts: when we describe characters spontaneously in everyday language, we use subjective, historically and culturally specific ideas and intuitions about body, psyche, sociality, and behaviour, such as those involving folk psychology or sociology. This is convenient, but not always sufficient or appropriate, depending on the objective of analysis.
- Scientific reconstructions of folk concepts: some scientific works reconstruct our implicit everyday understanding of body, psyche, sociality, and behaviour and make their underlying concepts explicit. Especially important are the reconstructions of folk psychology that have been developed within the philosophy of mind and empirical psychology. The extent to which this everyday knowledge is universal, historically stable, and not culturally specific is disputed (see Chapter 5).
- Current scientific theories: a third alternative is making use of the state of scientific research to examine psyche, body, and sociality. The question here is which scientific approach is the most useful. All human sciences, such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, philosophy, and many others could be employed. If non-human characters are involved, further scientific disciplines such as zoology may apply.
- Historically and socioculturally specific concepts: a fourth alternative is to begin with the historically and culturally specific dispositions of filmmakers and recipients and draw on past mental representations of body, psyche, and sociality that have influenced the film and its original reception. This can involve both folk and scientific theories from the history of ideas (*Geistesgeschichte*) of the time period involved.

In general, the main problem when analysing fictional characters can be defined as follows: To what extent is the use of (1) the audiovisual text, (2) the recipients' and filmmakers' everyday ideas, or (3) current knowledge from relevant scientific disciplines useful? If everyday ideas are to be employed, which ones—past or current ones? If the current sciences are to be used, which ones (e.g., psychoanalysis or cognitive psychology)? Which method is appropriate in which context of analysis? Can they be combined?

In the following, I will begin to answer some of these questions and compile a group of interdisciplinary instruments for analysing represented beings. The point is certainly not to provide an analysis schema that can be applied mechanically, but rather a flexible heuristic. At the same time, the premises of widespread methods, which are often only implicit, will become clear. In order to determine which alternative forms of describing characters there are and which concepts are most suitable, I will begin with the three areas of body, psyche, and sociality. Character behaviour will be dealt with briefly in light of its physical, psychological, and social aspects (and later in more detail in Chapter 9). As will be shown, the concepts for analysing character psychology are the most disputed, while there is a certain basic consensus in regard to corporeality and sociality.

6.2 Corporeality and External Behaviour

In film, the character's body is represented predominantly from the outside by the photographic moving image of an actor's body and voice. Casting choices play an essential role for every aspect of the character model—whether the slick Steven Seagal or Chuck Norris's craggy face appears in an action film makes a difference. The part of the character model that represents its body—the body image—thus mostly consists of mental images created through the perception of moving pictures and related associations. However, sound, language, and abstract thoughts also contribute to the body image, and presumably, ideas of how a body smells and feels, how large and heavy it is, can also be integrated. A character's body can be described in the form of language, e.g., self-portrayals or dialogue, it can be implied through material traces, artificially modelled and animated. Not only the external appearance, but also the body's interior can be visualised, e.g., when the title sequence of *Fight Club* races through the protagonist's brain.

While the physical characteristics of real persons can be perceived through direct contact, characters' bodies are mediated by the cinematic depiction and can be varied relatively freely in relation to reality. They are normally not fully visible in the frame and are broken down into details in a number of shots; the body image must be inferred from a series of representations of various body parts—head, hand, trunk—by means of mental synthesis. Certain body parts, particularly faces, are foregrounded. But even a depiction of a hand can give rise to suppositions about the rest of the body. Is the character male or female, young or old; is this the hand of a worker or a writer?

The question of when and in what order the body image is developed plays a role in terms of the character model's form and effect. In the title sequence of *Pretty Woman*, the camera glides slowly along the body of the prostrate Julia Roberts, lingering at her buttocks and breasts, but does not show her face. This portrays the character as a sexual object, at the same time building up the scene's tension as to when the face will be revealed, which occurs somewhat later in a close-up of her applying makeup. On

the other hand, the encounter with Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando) in *Apocalypse Now* represents the climax of tension present throughout the film. In the beginning, we see only an old photograph of him and hear parts of his story through dialogues, tape recordings, and voice-over, but are never given an opportunity to form our own opinion. When Kurtz appears near the conclusion, he is shown in darkness, concealed by face paint and flickering shadows, shown solely as a bulky silhouette, which adds to the character's enigmatic nature. In films such as *The Relic*, the monster is conventionally not shown in detail until the conclusion; before that there are just flashes of individual body parts, shots from the monster's point of view, and the reactions of victims. In certain instances, characters' bodies are never shown. The soldier whose body is mangled by an artillery shell in *Johnny Got His Gun* remains hidden by sheets, making it the object of an imagined horror that begins with suggestions and pre-knowledge about the body's approximate shape and the injuries. Body images are often made especially intense by such denials of visibility.

Other films play with intentional deviations from the conception of a consistent human body. Because they represent such a fundamental component of human experience, this type of manipulation can fascinate or shock viewers. In *Face/Off*, two men's faces are transplanted onto each other's bodies; in *Star Wars*, Darth Vader's mask itself becomes an expressionless face. In films with twins or doppelgangers, the same body is assigned to two different people, while in Luis Buñuel's *Cet obscur objet du désir/That Obscure Object of Desire*, the reverse happens: a single character is played by two actresses who look quite different. Physical metamorphoses are also part of film's repertoire, animation in particular. In werewolf and vampire films, the human body is transformed into that of an animal, and in *The Thing*, bodies of humans and animals merge in grotesque ways. In *Terminator 2*, an android's humanoid body returns to approximate humanness from liquefied metal. CGI animation films such as *Final Fantasy* try to depict their characters' bodies as naturalistically as possible, but they still evoke an underlying feeling of artificiality (the *uncanny valley effect*). All this can fundamentally disrupt perception or disturb patterns of experience that normally represent a firm foundation of human experience. Thus, characters' body images take on extremely varied and sometimes quite fragile or fragmentary forms. Depiction of the body's appearance often has intrinsic value. Consider the exhibition of stars' 'heavenly bodies' (Dyer 1987) or of bodies that deviate from expectations of normality, e.g., in *Freaks*.

This spectrum of filmic possibilities and effects has contributed to the fact that corporeality in media has increasingly become a theme of research.¹ Film has 'fundamentally revolutionised our mental representation of the body, or to put it more precisely: it has added innumerable variations and nuances to the images of the body that take shape in our consciousness as perceptions and are stored as memories'. And 'in movie theatres our own body engages in constant and complex interaction with the

1 For example, see Hübler 2001; Frölich, Middel, and Visarius 2002; Kraus 1996; Peucker 1999; Tischleder 2001; Roselt 2002.

body images that are projected onto the screen' (Kraus 1996: 395). Viewers can often instinctively share a character's actions and feelings, such as through affective mimicry or somatic empathy (Smith 1995: 95–102; Brinckmann 1999), which may be caused to some extent by the system of mirror neurons in the brain (Gallese and Guerra 2012). Depictions of bodies contain stimuli patterns that are described in evolutionary psychology as partner, danger, or baby schemata, and perceiving a character's body that possesses such characteristics tends to trigger sexual desire, fear, or feelings of endearment (see Eibl-Eibesfeld 1999: 727–42). More nuanced, socially learned body schemata can be activated, leading to fantasies involving potential actions involving the character.

Thus, the character's body is both a spectacle, a possible counterpart in interactions, and a mimetic object to which viewers' own bodies react directly. At the same time, it also is a complex sign that they decode and interpret. Bodies in film represent an essential starting point for inferring psychological and social traits. They often enable recognition of a character, become the key to a personality or the object of desire, or are interpreted as a social signal, a symbol, or a thematic instance. As bodies can be actively shaped to a certain extent (sometimes to an extreme degree, such as with cyborgs), they are closely intertwined with signals of psyche and sociality. Bodies are formed by social norms, not least by gender norms, and by habitualised behaviour and displays. They are intentionally employed as signs in various forms of self-display; the differentiation between the 'body natural' and the 'body politic' in social history (Kantorowicz 1990) has been taken up in film theory. Bodies indicate not only general social categories like gender or age, but also specific forms of membership in cultural or social groups and classes (mother, member of the aristocracy, etc.; see Dyer 1999: 109–10). Thus, characters' bodies can suggest many social and personality traits. In fiction films, this involves less danger of misjudgement than in real life, because physical characteristics are consciously selected, shaped, and employed to induce viewers to draw certain conclusions. Audiovisual representation contributes to that: actors stand on boxes to seem taller; makeup is applied; stars demand lighting that is flattering for their face. Some films also play with the viewers' conclusions about character traits made on the basis of appearance. A muscleman is revealed to be a coward (*Léolo*); a bourgeois mother proves to be a psychopathic murderer (*Serial Mom*); twins have opposite personalities (*Dead Ringers*).

But how can we describe characters' bodies and sensitise our perceptions of them? The description of a body can be limited to observations that involve few assumptions and are purely superficial or behavioural (the woman raises her arm); but more often they include psychological and social interpretations and judgements (the policewoman resolutely waves a taxi over). However, even the precise description of the body already presents difficulties for everyday language. Our vocabulary is limited in this area, and verbalising physical characteristics and processes is often made more difficult by taboos and the perceived self-evidence of our own body (Gugutzer 2004: 10). Despite the scholarly interest in physicality, there is still a lack

of systematic categories for nuanced perception and description of a character's body. A few theoretical approaches provide concepts relating to an actor's performance, wardrobe, makeup, etc., but they focus more on the representational techniques than the represented body itself (e.g., Dyer 1999: 110). In most cases, the physical aspect is assumed to be straightforward; people do not venture beyond the limited options of everyday language. That neglecting the body in this way is a deficit is clearly shown by the wide variety of scientific concepts that can contribute to a more nuanced perception and expression. In many cases, such concepts make it possible to name a character's subtle traits that are barely identifiable in everyday language. In addition, they make it possible to outline the field of physical characteristics and recognise what would constitute an adequate description in specific cases.

For a start, even though it might seem trivial, we should recall the most general basic categories of corporeality in film. As mentioned above, characters' bodies can be natural and supernatural; organic and artificial; anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, phytomorphic, or hybrid. They can be ascribed physical qualities such as size, mass, materiality, and texture; at the same time, we assume that their owners experience them with their senses. The parts of a body—head, torso, extremities, skin, hair—are arranged in certain forms and proportions. Some physical characteristics are relatively stable—such as shape or size—but they also can change over the long term, for instance through aging. The more fleeting characteristics of bodily appearance include external behaviour, temporary states such as illness, reactions such as sweating, and near-body artefacts like clothing. Numerous needs and desires are considered physical (hunger, sexual drives), and many bodily aspects and processes such as blushing or bowel movements are linked to wishes and fears, taboos, and norms. This link generally applies to the body's vulnerability, to what it is capable of (strength, speed, robustness, etc.), and to sensitive areas of physical coexistence and contact (attractiveness, sexuality, nudity, relations to perceived in-groups and out-groups). In all these respects, characters' bodies may deviate from real bodies to a certain extent. Often meaningful characteristics, such as eyes or facial expressions, are emphasised by camera, makeup, acting, or animation. Physical characteristics that are usually not perceptible (e.g., genes, internal anatomy) can be made objects of attention. Films locate the bodies of represented beings in space, place them in relationships to one another and display their movements, speeds, and rhythms.

Looking for ways to go beyond this general level, we can find suitable concepts for a more nuanced description of the character's body in research on *nonverbal communication*. Such studies are used in psychology and linguistics to understand the interaction of people and have been taken up in artificial intelligence (AI) research and game studies to shape the interaction of human users with computer avatars. They start with the observation that the psyche and sociality of humans and characters are understood to a large degree on the basis of what can be perceived on the surface—appearance, behaviour, speech, and environment. Empirical studies indicate that the

body is in fact not an especially reliable indicator of personality traits, but this does not change the fact that everyone uses it to make quick, automatic assessments of others. Moreover, it is generally assumed that a person's body and appearance cause them to have experiences that shape their personality and vice versa (becoming vain as a result of admiration, or turning shy due to exclusion).

Research on nonverbal communication permits, on the one hand, more precise descriptions of character's bodies, and on the other hand, explanations of the viewers' conclusions regarding the character's psyche and sociality on the basis of their body. Works in this field distinguish the following aspects of corporeality:²

- general appearance and accessories (e.g., eyeglasses, hairdo);
- face, facial expressions, and gaze behaviour;
- posture and motion behaviour (gestures, proxemics, and haptics);
- verbal and paralinguistic behaviour (manner of speaking); and
- the embedding in an environment's situational contexts.

The audience usually perceives these aspects simultaneously, subliminally, holistically, multidimensionally, and at high speed. In contrast, in character analysis it is often important to observe these aspects closely, to perceive them consciously and to name them explicitly. In the following, some categories are presented that can be used for this purpose.

General Appearance

An individual's appearance varies in terms of body shape, size, weight, the shapes and proportions of body parts, colour and texture of the skin, hair and eyes, and sex and age characteristics and deformations. The body shape and physique are investigated in the fields of biological morphology, medicine, and others. A character's overall physical constitution can already suggest certain character traits. Shakespeare's Caesar, who said, 'Let me have men about me that are fat', suspected the slight Cassius, who looked 'lean and hungry', of thinking too much, which made him dangerous. On a (contested) empirical basis, psychological constitutional theories posit a close relationship between physique and personality. The basic statements of their main proponents, Ernst Kretschmer and William Sheldon, closely resemble each other as well as folk-psychological assumptions.³ Both distinguish three constitutional types (often found in mixed forms), claiming that they are statistically linked with characteristic personality traits. According to them,

2 Here, I combine the overviews of Argyle 2004; Hoffner and Cantor 1991; Hübler 2001: 12–21; Manninen 2003. See also Fischer-Lichte 1983a.

3 In the following, I will employ Kretschmer's terminology. See Asendorpf 2005: 166–68; Fisseni 2003: chapter 12.

- heavy-boned, muscular athletes (mesomorphic) are frequently dominant, action-oriented, and inflexible;
- wide-hipped, plump pyknic types (endomorphs) are amiable, pleasure-seeking, and pragmatic; and
- tall, thin leptosomes (ectomorphs) are lone wolves, intellectual, and sensitive.

This corresponds to widespread everyday assumptions in Western cultures about ‘dim-witted muscle(women)’, ‘good-natured corpulent people’, and ‘cerebral thin people’ which can also be associated with certain lifestyles, e.g., with the assumption that few heavyset individuals like sports. Surveys have also found that overweight individuals are considered more easy-going, loquacious, and warm-hearted; mesomorphs are assumed to be stronger, more self-confident, and dominant; and tall, thin people are considered ambitious, suspicious, and high-strung (Hoffner and Cantor 1991: 66–67). While there is no solid empirical confirmation for such folk-psychological assumptions (Asendorpf 2005: 167), they are still influential in film production and reception. The same is true of further physical characteristics. Research shows that it is likely that the personalities of real people and characters are judged more positively when they are considered attractive, and identical behaviour is judged differently for attractive and unattractive individuals (Hoffner and Cantor 1991: 66). Skin and hair colour activate further stereotypes and prejudices. For example, as late as the 1960s, German television viewers assessed blond, blue-eyed actors more positively than those with dark hair (Hoffner and Cantor 1991: 67).

Such impressions are also shaped by body-near accessories—clothing, beard and hair style, makeup, jewellery, tattoos, weapons, or eyeglasses—which can alter the character’s appearance to a great degree. Dyer speaks of ‘dual articulation’ through culturally coded artefacts: firstly, they denote social types, and secondly, they express an individual’s personality (Dyer 1999: 110). This is intentional in part, as a means of self-presentation, and in part coincidental. The clothing characters wear—a suit of armour or a space suit—positions them in terms of time and culture. Artefacts signal job, social role, or status: bakers and bankers wear characteristic clothing. *How* they wear their clothes, in contrast, is more indicative of personality; think of the sloppy police officer with an incorrectly buttoned uniform. Television viewers in the 1950s examined the state of clothing and its neatness and cleanliness as an indication of the character’s moral qualities (Hoffner and Cantor 1991: 68). Eyeglasses are often employed in characterisation. Individuals who wear glasses are considered intelligent, but at the same time unathletic and not especially attractive. When transforming into Superman, Clark Kent removes his eyeglasses, and in many films, male or female wallflowers turn into desirable beauties by removing their glasses and putting on different clothes. The effort many people put into hairdos and the numerous generational conflicts involving hair reflects its importance. Whether a pompadour, bun, or long beard or hair, hair styles categorise characters according to social milieus and attitudes toward life. Famous people like Einstein can even be

recognised on the basis of their hair alone (Landau 1993: 18–19).

A character's clothing is usually consciously chosen by the costume designer or wardrobe supervisor to stress certain bodily features and to indicate personality and sociality. Clothing manipulates the body shape and can serve as a protective or restrictive shell. Broad shoulder pads and thin waists emphasise sex characteristics. Ornaments and the cut focus attention on details like the neckline and décolletage, while loose clothing conceals them. Wardrobe also influences the actor's freedom of movement and sense of body. People move differently when wearing miniskirts or jeans, sneakers or high heels; heavy leather coats slow movements, suggesting more economical, powerful gestures. An erotic game of concealment and unveiling can be staged by the plunging back of an elegant evening dress, by a muscle shirt, which displays an action hero's glistening arms and shoulders in action, or by Rita Hayworth slipping off her gloves (*Gilda*). Clothing also sets groups of characters apart. In *The Experiment*, the vulnerable feet of the prisoners in flip-flops shuffle past the heavy boots of the guards.

The choice of clothing can express the character's motives, worldview, and general attitude toward life: Marlon Brando's characters in *The Wild One* and *The Fugitive Kind* value their motorcycle or snakeskin jackets; in *Wild at Heart*, Sailor (Nicolas Cage) chooses the snakeskin jacket as a 'symbol of his individuality'. Roland Barthes undertook a comprehensive analysis of the complex 'language of fashion' in Western cultures (1983). Whether characters follow fashion trends, whether their clothes are 'classic', 'sporty', 'elegant', or 'eccentric', or if they fail to conform to a dress code and prefer functionality or inexpensiveness permits conclusions about their personality and sociality. How well they cope with the world of fashion indicates their origin, educational level, intelligence, discretionary time, and taste. Changes in clothing reflect changes in the identity: a rise or fall when it becomes more luxurious or shabby; developing a particular style or letting oneself go when it becomes more tasteful or careless; a change in identity if it is intended to conform or provoke; a change in mood when bright colours are replaced by matte, gloomy shades. By means of her clothing, Charlotte Vale (Bette Davis) transforms herself from a 'dowdy spinster' into a 'woman of fashion' before becoming 'a whole person' (quoted in Dyer 1999: 110ff.), while in *Pretty Woman*, Vivian Ward (Julia Roberts) switches from a prostitute who dresses in a vulgarly sexy manner to an elegant lady. Some characters, usually in comic roles, such as the characters played by the Marx Brothers, are typified, caricatured, or made easily recognisable by their unchanging clothing. Intertextual references that characterise the character can also be made by means of clothing. In the science-fiction classic *Blade Runner*, Harrison Ford wears the trench coat typical of film noir detectives (Manthey 1999: 188).

Therefore, characters' clothing performs a variety of functions while complying with the economics and pragmatics of production. In early sound films, for example, the use of textiles that rustled had to be avoided; in the initial experiments with Technicolor, which tended to produce extremely bright colours, the wardrobe was in pastel shades; and the increase in the screen size that began in the 1950s made attention to details more important (Manthey 1999: 199).

Face, Facial Expressions, and Looking

Of all body parts, faces attract the most attention, and in the field of film studies, they have been the object of relatively comprehensive research.⁴ Their stable characteristics include the ratio between the sizes of head and face; the shape, size, position, and proportions of the eyes, eyebrows, nose, and mouth; and the face's plasticity, mobility, skin texture, and muscle tension.

The long intercultural history of physiognomy from Europe to China shows a widespread tendency to draw conclusions about people's personalities on the basis of their face.⁵ Johann Caspar Lavater defined physiognomy as the 'science of recognising a person's character in the broadest sense on the basis of their appearance' (1772). He described facial proportions in great detail, and his conclusions were apodictic; for example, stupidity is supposedly indicated by the angle between the eye and corner of the mouth (Lavater 1772: engraving no. 63). While physiognomy actually is a pseudoscience, an implicit folk physiognomy still determines viewers' conclusions about personality traits. Moreover, physiognomy has a long artistic tradition. In Europe, Lavater's works unleashed a boom in the eighteenth century, influencing writers such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Honoré de Balzac, or Émile Zola, as well as visual artists like Fuseli. This artistic tradition in turn shaped folk psychology and filmmaking. In a way similar to Balzac's characters (Koch 1991: 99–117), Sergei Eisenstein's workers and capitalists are based on an implicit physiognomic theory.

Thus, physiognomy can be regarded as an explication of widespread folk-psychological assumptions. Based on empirical investigations, some modern psychologists record a broad intersubjective consensus about attributing certain traits of personality or sociality on the basis of faces, such as attractiveness, mood, extroversion, social acceptability, reliability, intelligence, and openness (Henss 1995). According to advertising research, a childlike face (round, smooth skin, high and curved forehead, weak chin, large eyes) emphasises the impression of honesty, while a mature face signals expert knowledge (Hübler 2001: 50–51). The baby schema is often exaggerated in animated characters—Tweety, Heidi, Mickey Mouse, *shojo* protagonists—and even adults, such as Homer in *The Simpsons*, often seem cute or 'kawaii' in this way.

However, the face is more than just a physiognomic form; it is most importantly an instrument of communication, a playing field of expression. The often mentioned 'expressionless face' does not really exist; there are only varying degrees of clarity with which facial expressions communicate. Even a 'stoneface' expresses something, albeit unclearly or ambiguously, depending on the context, such as an effort to hide feelings, emotionlessness, pain, or stupor. A decisive area in facial communication is 'oculesics', which refers to the study of the gaze, eye movement, and eye contact (Manninen 2003, 172). The direction of eye movements reveals visual orientation, and also important are the duration and intensity of the gaze and qualitative characteristics such as the width of the eye opening, pupil size, and blinking.

4 See Barck and Wolfgang Beilenhoff 2004 or Steimatsky 2017.

5 For more on physiognomy, see Koch 1991: 99–105; Landau 1993: 123–43; Gerlach 2004.

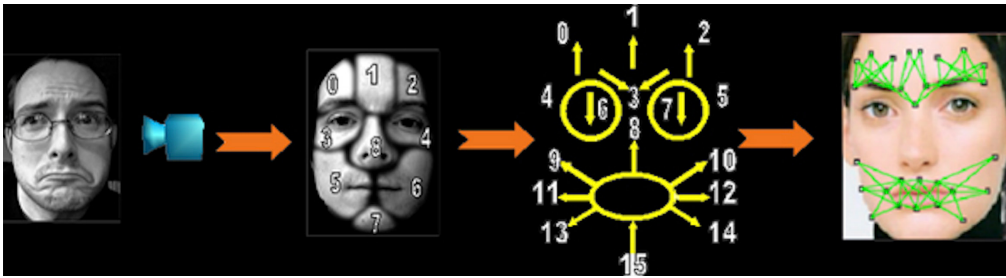


Fig. 12 Research in IT and animation is currently trying to determine the basics of human facial expression and apply them to virtual models. In this example, the expression of a real person was divided into separate areas, and the basic directions of facial movement were recorded and applied to a computer-generated model. (Fidaleo 2008. All rights reserved.)

The psychologist Paul Ekman and his collaborators claim that the facial expressions employed to communicate certain basic emotions such as joy, sadness, anger, and surprise are comprehensible across cultures. Their Facial Affect Coding System (FACS) describes which of the forty-four groups of facial muscles move in what combination when a certain basic emotion is expressed (Ekman 2003). Ekman's claims are contested, but his approach and the FACS have been used for character design and facial animation in computer-animated films. The FACS also offers explanations why some faces seem to express an emotion even when at rest; for instance, low, closely set eyebrows can make a face look angry and suggest that a character is difficult to get along with (Hoffner and Cantor 1991: 67). Someone can have a sad or cheerful face, even if his or her personality is quite different. This is also applied to anthropomorphise animal characters in animation: a basset hound, with its sagging jowls and mournful eyes, looks more melancholic than a spitz.

Many facial expressions are specific to particular cultures or times, and sociocultural rules determine whether, when, how, and with what intensity feelings should be expressed. Individual and typical expressions are equally important. Facial expressions convey also habitual features specific to personality, such as in what way and how often someone smiles. Moreover, facial expressions are often ambiguous and their most subtle nuances are important, though it is often difficult to find words to describe them (think of Mona Lisa's smile). Of course, the interpretation of facial expressions in film also depends on filmic conventions and contexts (see Dyer 1999: 15), examples being editing, lighting, and iconographic traditions. Béla Balázs compares facial expressions in film, especially in close-ups, with musical expressions of feelings in which patterns, rhythms, modulations, chords (mixtures of feelings), and tempos (emergence and fading of emotional expressions) can be observed (Balázs 2001: 43ff.).

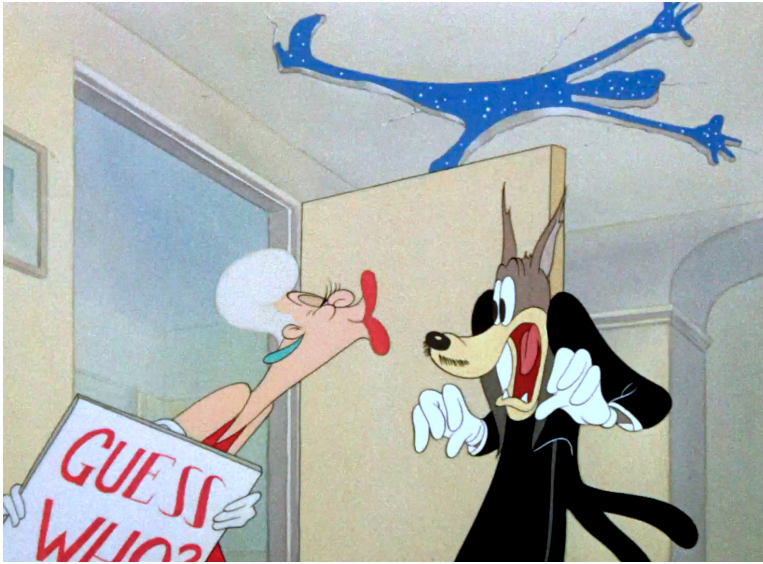


Fig. 13 Cartoons often produce comic effects through exaggerated expressions and gestures, in this case in Tex Avery's *Red Hot Riding Hood*, which also makes heavy use of national, gender, and age-related stereotypes. (Dir. Tex Avery, *Red Hot Riding Hood*, 1943, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, USA. All rights reserved.)

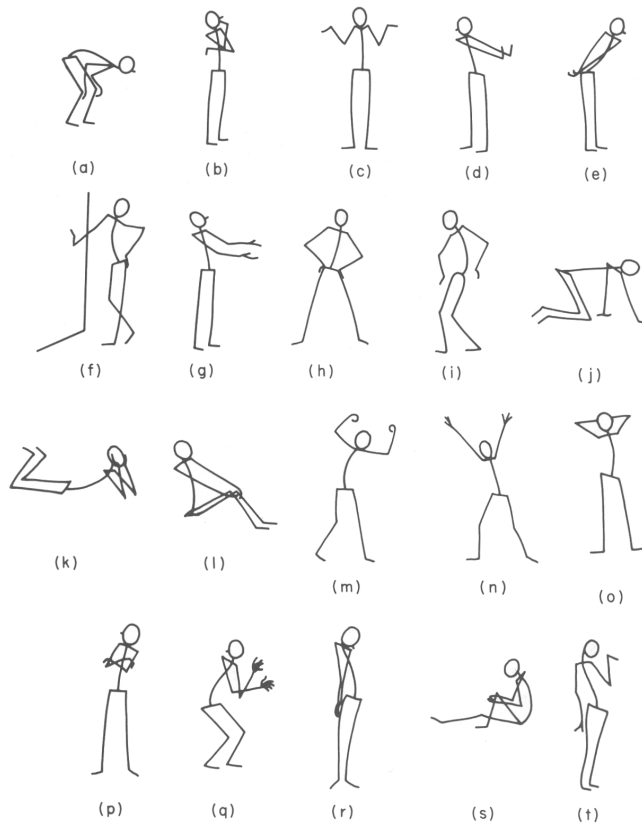
Movement and Proxemics

In addition to facial expressions, kinesics includes gestures, posture, and the character's behaviour in relation to space, proximity, and physical contact. The most nuanced of these behaviours may be gestures. This area covers the movement of arms and hands, which can take place with varying degrees of dynamism and expressiveness, as well as movement of the head and feet, such as nodding and rocking the legs. Postures while sitting, standing, and lying down also allow insight into characters. Do they bend over or stand up straight; are they tense or relaxed? 'Openness and relaxation in posture signal more intimacy and informality than a tense posture; a greater degree of physical proximity to a conversational partner makes the person seem [...] spontaneous, and also dominant' (Hübler 2001: 53). Behaviour in relation to space includes facing certain objects, territorial behaviour, and especially proxemics, behaviour in relation to others in the form of turning toward or away from them, creating closeness or distance, inclusion or exclusion. Depending on personal, situational, and cultural standards, approaching someone can be seen as obtrusive and moving away from someone as unfriendly or dismissive (see Hübler 2001: 18). The amount of distance between characters usually says something about their relationship, and feelings of intimacy or distance between characters are often conveyed to viewers. Persons who come closer when communicating and initiate *haptics*—whether a friendly handshake or an aggressive punch—tend to be considered more powerful and of a higher status than the recipient of the contact

(Hübler 2001: 52–53). Furthermore, people react with varying levels of sensitivity to physical contact, pressure, warmth, cold, and pain, as well as smells. Characters' kinetic behaviour often reveals a distinctive way of dealing with time (chronemics; Manninen 2003: 172): they are fast or slow, move at certain rhythms, fail to appear on time or have extended pauses while communicating. The way in which they move and react to movements characterises them as generally healthy or sick, full of energy or tired, in good condition or unathletic, precise or sloppy, frantic or relaxed, etc. People who often display expressive behaviour spontaneously tend to be regarded as nicer and more attractive (Hübler 2001: 51–52). However, this behaviour is in most cases ambiguous and culturally variable, meaning that subtle nuances can play an important role.

Figure 13.1 The meaning of some postures

(a) curious; (b) puzzled; (c) indifferent; (d) rejecting; (e) watching; (f) self-satisfied; (g) welcoming; (h) determined; (i) stealthy; (j) searching; (k) watching; (l) attentive; (m) violent anger; (n) excited; (o) stretching; (p) surprised, dominating, suspicious; (q) sneaking; (r) shy; (s) thinking; (t) affected



Source: Rosenberg and Langer 1965

Fig. 14 The bodily postures and gestures of characters can make their emotions or intentions visible, even from a distance. Here is an overview of expressive postures from Argyle 2004: 205, based on work by Rosenberg and Langer 1965. (All rights reserved.)

Nonverbal behaviour can serve a variety of purposes, such as replacing language (nodding), illustrating statements (indicating small size with the fingers), regulating conversations (eye contact), expressing emotions and satisfying needs (such as reducing inner tension by means of displacement activity; Hübler 2001: 22–27). When this happens, nonverbal behaviour can either be deliberate and follow social rules, such as shaking hands as a greeting, or it can be informal and involuntary, such as the protagonist's compulsive cleaning in *Repulsion*. Involuntary behaviour generally seems more authentic and expressive, which is emphasised in acting styles such as method acting. Conscious and involuntary behaviour can be played off against each other, for instance if a character pretends to be calm by means of a stiff posture, but nervously works his or her fingers at the same time (Dyer 1999: 113). A discrepancy between physical and linguistic expression is often employed in film '[...] to depict ambivalence and ambiguity, and also shifts in meaning and multi-layered relationship structures' (Hickethier 2001a: 179). With the aid of such contradictions between word and image, characters can be depicted as being mysterious and incomprehensible, two-faced liars, or insecure and pitiful. This also suggests a connection to another central area: language.

Language and Paralinguistic Behaviour

Language use is a central type of social action: speech acts, which have a physical and perceptible basis. Language is a particularly versatile, fast, economical, and precise instrument for conveying information. It can condense, create abstractions, and name traits better than images. Since it serves as the most important indicator of personality and sociality in everyday life, it also plays a central role in characterisation, mostly in the form of dialogues and monologues rather than written language (intertitles, inserts). That many screenwriting manuals insist that action should be visualised does not prove that dialogue is unsuitable for characterisation; on the contrary, using it is an obvious thing to do. Today, according to cognitive psychologist James Cutting, 'roughly half of all shots in Hollywood movies show one character talking to another, and as many as 70 percent have a character talking' (Cutting 2021: 28). The individual manner of speaking; the lexical, syntactic, and indirect meaning of words; simple or elevated style; verse or prose; and the overall structure of the text, its rhythm and timing all contribute to the depiction of characters. Almost the entire field examined by linguistics plays a role in this, e.g., strategies of self-display or when several individuals are addressed simultaneously, in which the statement is directed not only at the dialogue partner, but also at others nearby (see Hickethier 2001b).

Three central aspects can be distinguished when depicting characters through their language: who is talking (speaker), what is said (content), and how it is said (style, form, and tone or mood). In the dimension of the speakers, one can most

generally separate self-characterisation and characterisation by others.⁶ Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, for instance, features several explicit self-characterisations by the film's protagonist:

ALVY (gesturing) I've a very pessimistic view of life. You should know this about me if we're gonna go out, you know. I-I-I feel that life is-is divided up into the horrible and the miserable. (Allen and Brickman 2001)

Speakers are also implicitly characterised by their recurring preference for certain content: Alvy often talks about art or philosophy, thereby revealing himself to be an intellectual. Statements about self and others are almost always subjectively coloured by the speaker's personality and interests, and this does not only concern their explicit topics and messages. Dialogues open up a broad field of indirect meanings in which prior knowledge about the conversation's context, social roles, everyday connections, and communicative rules are necessary to be able to infer the personality of the speakers and the individuals they are speaking about. When the two main characters of *Annie Hall* talk to each other for the first time, such *subtext* is made explicit through subtitles that reveal their hidden thoughts:

ALVY (pointing toward the apartment after a short pause) So, did you do shoot the photographs in there or what?

ANNIE (nodding, her hand on her hip) Yeah, yeah, I sorta dabble around, you know.

Annie's thoughts pop on the screen as she talks: I dabble? Listen to me—what a jerk!

ALVY They're... they're... they're wonderful, you know. They have ... they have, uh ... a ... a quality.

As do Alvy's: You are a great-looking girl

ANNIE Well, I-I-I would-I would like to take a serious photography course soon.

Again, Annie's thoughts pop on: He probably thinks I'm a yo-yo.

ALVY Photography's interesting, 'cause, you know, it's-it's a new art form, and a, uh, a set of aesthetic criteria have not emerged yet.

And Alvy's: I wonder what she looks like naked?

(Allen and Brickman 2001)

This example also indicates that viewers not only draw on the explicit content of dialogues, but also on their subtext in order to assess characters according to the norms and values of their times and cultures. In this case, what was supposed to appear humorous and honest to viewers at the time may nowadays irritate many as sexist.

6 See Pfister 1988: 252–53; Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 63–64.

To make matters even more complicated, self-characterisations and those by others are often intertwined in complex ways. When characterising others, speakers normally characterise not only the person they are talking about, but indirectly also themselves and their relationship, such as in the dialogue between the piano teacher Erika Kohut (Isabelle Huppert) and her student Walter Brenner (Benoît Magimel) in Haneke's *La pianiste/The Piano Teacher*. Erika tells Walter, who is allegedly in love with her, to read aloud a letter in which she describes her masochistic sexual desires. The dialogue is indirect in several different ways: a letter is read aloud by the person it was addressed to. Its explicit sexual context indirectly characterises the writer, Erika's psychological wounds, desires, auto-aggression, angst, and her defensiveness with others. The manner in which Walter reads the letter and his comments characterise both Erika and himself: by being repulsed and condemning her as a pervert, he reveals himself to be sexually 'normal', but also free of empathy, cold hearted, and socially perverted.

This already points to the third aspect of language, its style, form, and tone, or the manner in which something is said, including *paralanguage*, the acoustic characteristics of dialogues (Hübler 2001: 16ff.). The manner in which an individual uses language includes certain constant vocal qualities: pitch spectrum, pitch and rhythm control, speaking speed, volume, and resonance. Vocalisations such as clearing the throat, laughing, snorting, and other sounds such as vocal fillers ('uh'), slips of the tongue, and pauses can characterise the speaker's momentary states. Variable intensity, volume, pitch, and elongation during speaking can comment on situations and describe characters. Accents and dialects not only give information about characters according to linguistic communities or geographic regions (singling out, for example, an East Coast urbanite in the Wild West), they often provide information about status groups. For example, dialect is often associated with 'simple people'. Language usage and style are also informative: the length and complexity of sentences, the employment of polite forms of address, justifications, apologies, and grammatical errors indicate educational level, status, politeness, self-confidence, and intelligence (Hoffner and Cantor 1991: 69). In these ways, characters' voices often convey a great deal about their personality and traits such as dominance, self-confidence, politeness, competence, and goodwill (Hoffner and Cantor 1991: 68–69). The loud torrent of words declaimed by Dr Kellogg in *The Road to Wellville* underlines his imperious air. The title character of *Little Voice* has a telling nickname. Voices can also activate star images, such as when characters in animation films are voiced by well-known actors; in *Antz*, for example, Woody Allen did the voice for the insect protagonist, and Sharon Stone and Jennifer Lopez lent their voices to other characters. Finally, the entire area of speaking style is greatly affected by dubbing in film; even when attempting to achieve the greatest possible similarity with the original, shifts in the character's personality are unavoidable.

Spatial Environments and Situational Contexts

Characters always have certain relationships with other characters and objects in their spatial environments, such as the architecture or tools of action. They are characterised also by means of this situational context. Most importantly, characters belong to a spatial and physical configuration in relation to each other (see Chapter 10). Individual characters are judged in relation to their fellow characters and characterised on the basis of their relationships with them: the one-eyed man is king in the land of the blind; the small-time criminal is an angel compared to big-time crooks (such as—apparently—Roger ‘Verbal’ Kint in *The Usual Suspects*). The presence of parallel characters (doppelgangers, twins) and contrasting characters (adversaries, Beauty and the Beast) steer the viewer’s attention toward certain traits. In general, four aspects of characters’ physically based relationships with their environments can be identified.⁷

A character’s environment is (1) a space for perception and experience. By observing external aspects of a character’s situation (whether from their subjective point of view or from outside), we can draw conclusions about their thoughts and feelings. What are they paying attention to, and what are they thinking or feeling? The rain that runs down the windshield in front of the antihero’s face in *Taxi Driver* and the devastated industrial landscape in *Il deserto rosso* not only express the characters’ melancholy emptiness or nervous alienation, but also affect viewers’ moods. They represent atmospheric emotional spaces, or mood spaces (Koch 1991: 135).

The environment serves as (2) a space for action and relationships, a social space that provides opportunities for (inter)action. What can the character do in this situation; what does its environment suggest or permit? Such questions determine viewers’ expectations of the character’s actions and inferences about motives. Where the character spends most of their time, in a public or private space, in a desert or an office, on the street or at home, contributes to characterisation. This space also involves conflict, assigns the character to conflicting groups and sets limitations on action. When such limitations are transgressed, the character is shown as being daring or extremely motivated, such as with the turf wars in *Romeo and Juliet* (1996), *Colors* (1988), and *West Side Story* (1961). Furthermore, the ability, attitude, and manner in which characters deal with certain things help characterising them. For Dirty Harry and Black Widow, a pistol is a matter-of-fact instrument, a tool and sign of their power. Ada, the mute protagonist in *The Piano*, depends on her instrument as a means of communication and self-expression.

The environment is (3) a space that has been formed: we can draw conclusions about someone’s personality from the way they influence their environment (e.g., apartment, car, or office). The chaotic, littered workplace of the corrupt computer specialist in *Jurassic Park* heralds his downfall. We foresee that his messiness will foil his escape with the stolen dinosaur embryos.

7 In the field of literary studies, Seidel 1985 examines the connection between character and context. Functions of space in film are described by Wulff (1999: 77–145).

The environment is (4) a symbolic space. Objects and the environment can symbolise mental states and the character's traits as 'objective correlates' (Dyer 1999: 112). The extinguished candle at a deathbed, Norman Bates' stuffed birds in *Psycho*, and Dracula's spooky castle all help portray the characters involved. In extreme cases, the whole storyworld may represent a character's inner life: the girl's memory in *Inside Out*, the killer's subconscious in *The Cell*. The lonesome environment of John Wayne's Wild West marks the people who live there; a much different kind of individual can be found in *Metropolis*. By means of montage and associative images, characters can be directly compared with something, e.g., a vain man with a peacock in Eisenstein's *October (Ten Days that Shook the World)*. Spatial relationships can be correlated with symbolic relationships: up/down can stand for rich/poor or good/evil (Wulff 1999a: 126). Such meanings expressed through space can be culturally coded or rooted in physical experience. For example, the meaning of 'up' is associated with ideas of happiness, control, and abundance, as it is based on physical experiences of an upright posture, a controlling view from above and the action of filling containers (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 49–54).

An Example: The Corporeality of Rick Blaine

The categories illustrated above can be helpful for perceiving characters' physicality and external behaviour with more sensitivity and describing them with greater precision. Their connection can be best illustrated with a concrete example. It only suggests possible conclusions with regard to psychological and social traits, as they will be dealt with in greater detail in the following sections.



Fig. 15 Rick Blaine's expressive face and immaculate attire in *Casablanca*. (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.)

Rick Blaine is approximately forty years old, of slightly above average height compared to other characters in the film (thanks to film techniques that make Bogart's body appear taller), and has a slim to athletic build. His clothes are elegant, tasteful, and classically masculine: a white dinner jacket and shirt, dark bowtie and trousers, later a fedora and trench coat. Rick stands upright, and on the whole, his body language reflects extreme calm. He never makes any superfluous movements, and when he does move, it is always quickly, smoothly, and powerfully.

Rick's oval face looks large in relation to his head, which again looks large in relation to his torso. As a result, his face has a marked presence overall and often dominates in the company of other characters. Rick is clean-shaven, his high forehead has expressive furrows and sharp lateral corners, and his dark hair is carefully trimmed and combed straight back from the high hairline. His somewhat tired, dark eyes, which are often in a slight squint, lie fairly low and are emphasised by rounded, powerful brows. The eyebrows slant slightly toward the edges of his face, which makes his expression seem somewhat melancholy. The large, softly shaped mouth with its characteristic little scar lies underneath a straight, rather small nose and a long upper lip. His teeth, large and certainly not perfectly even, are rarely visible. A slight overbite is balanced by a powerful, wide, and slightly cleft chin.

Rick's facial expressions are sparing, and his facial features tend to change little other than through a narrowing of the eyes or raising of the eyebrows. His gaze is serious and concentrated, quite intense when directed at Ilsa, and he rarely looks at other characters, such as Ugarte, when speaking to them. Typical for his expressions are a delayed upward glance under a furrowed forehead. Rick rarely smiles, and seldom broadly; when he does, his smile is usually ironic. When talking, Rick normally moves solely his mouth, with the rest of his face nearly motionless or even slack. His voice is distinctive: deep, sonorous, throaty, and also sharp and nasal, often resembling a snarl. Rick's manner of speaking is curt, laconic, and efficient; he never employs pauses or filler words. While others, Renault and Ugarte in particular, often talk a great deal during conversations, Rick says fairly little in short, precisely worded sentences. His first extended dialogue is only at the end of the film when saying farewell to Ilsa. Contradictions between what he says and his body language rarely appear, which underlines his authenticity and integrity.

Rick's apartment is sparsely furnished; the exotic, rambling nightclub represents his turf, as is revealed by his direct looks and confident strides through the room. Again and again, alcohol and cigarettes, symbols of a grown man's pleasure, are used to show that he 'can hold his liquor'. When dealing with his employees, Rick often initiates friendly physical contact, but from a position of superiority, for example, he pats Sam and the croupier on the shoulder. He is frequently dominant in terms of proxemics, in that he determines the amount of distance to whomever else is involved, such as when he pulls Ilsa closer in the farewell scene. A look or a slight nod is often all that is needed for him to have his way, influence others, or initiate events, such as

when giving instructions to the bouncer or having the orchestra play 'La Marseillaise'.

Taken together, these external features produce a characteristic overall impression. While he may not meet the most popular standards for good looks, Rick is attractive in his own way. Among other things, this is because his features and behaviour have a marked presence and are memorable. They express power, energy, and body control exercised in a seemingly casual manner. They signal personality traits such as self-confidence and self-control, authenticity, coolness, intelligence, taste, and sensitivity and therefore correspond to a masculine ideal of his time. Finally, they emphasise Rick's social status, his competence, and agency—aspects that will be dealt with in more detail in the next section, on characters' sociality. Ilsa's physicality, for example, is presented in a much different way: Ingrid Bergman's rather tall, athletic body is reduced in apparent size by means of clothing, lighting, framing, and *mise-en-scène* to focus on the beauty and youth expressed by her face; her facial expressions, gaze, and body language show a much greater degree of emotionality and uncertainty. When comparing the two characters, another noteworthy aspect is that early in the film there are more shots that make Rick seem taller than the people he is interacting with, such as Ugarte, Renault, and the croupier. After Ilsa arrives, he often seems shorter, compared to Laszlo and even Ilsa. In the famous climactic scene and the final dialogue, he again towers above Ilsa, which reflects his regained agency.

Outward Behaviour

Characters are involved in various kinds of relationships with other characters, objects, and environments (which will be the topic of Chapter 10). They are positioned in a certain space, deal with objects, are involved in events, and behave in certain ways. Rick's physical behaviour takes place in a social context; his language and nonverbal communication are embedded in social interactions. The area of behaviour should now be briefly outlined first before moving on to the theme of sociality (Chapter 9 will then deal in more detail with characters' actions and motivations).

Up to this point, I have concentrated on the external, physical aspect of behaviour, and here on the minor, unspectacular actions almost always present when a character is seen. But some actions can be separated from minor behaviour, because they are complex and significant, influence the plot, are based on characters' conscious decisions and linked to central values. Most of those meaningful actions in film relate to other characters; in other words, they are social. Screenwriting guides emphasise that they are decisive for characterisation and assessment by the viewer. According to Robert McKee, characters are depicted most clearly by their behaviour when under pressure: their true character and moral qualities manifest themselves when they make decisions of great personal significance (1997). Acting under pressure draws attention and represents a touchstone for other forms of characterisation. Regardless of how courageous and intelligent a hero looks, cowardly and stupid reactions when the going gets tough destroy this impression. Mainstream film often does the opposite:

unimportant actions show the protagonists as average persons, but when forced to take on more powerful opponents and overcome formidable obstacles, the heroes can show what they are really capable of. The young heroine in *Winter's Bone*, Spielberg's protagonists in *Duel* and *Jaws*, or the 'final girls' surviving the monster in horror movies undergo this kind of development.

The minor kinds of behaviour mentioned above not only provide a foundation for and modify such major actions, they also fill in the characterisation for all those traits not covered by the more important acts. They perform a variety of social functions, such as conveying information, regulating interactions, expressing interpersonal intimacy, influencing others, managing the emotions, and implementing instrumental objectives (Patterson 1999). This can be put more simply: major actions characterise characters in terms of central ethical values, while minor ones do this in the other personality areas (see Koch 1991: 265ff.).

Major and minor actions can be differentiated in terms of one-time actions that stress the character's dynamic, variable personality, and habitual ones that depict it as static (Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 61). This is often employed in comedy, e.g., when a character repeatedly makes the same mistake (running gag). Another important difference is between different modalities of an action: whether the action is in fact performed or merely considered, whether a deed or an omission is involved (Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 61; Tomasi 1988: 64).

The previous chapter showed that behaviour that deviates from social norms and roles, which is therefore unexpected, but at the same time is consistent, repeated, and habitually demonstrated by characters, most clearly characterises them. The two can be connected: a number of memorable characters consistently behave in deviant ways, such as Leda Caruso (Olivia Colman) in *The Lost Daughter*, Yoshitaka Nishi (Takeshi Kitano) in *Hana-bi*, and Melvin Udall (Jack Nicholson) in *As Good as It Gets*.

Aggressive and prosocial behaviour (sex and crime) are some of the central themes dealt with in film. Many empirical studies confirm the intuition that certain aspects of the action, specifically morals, power, activity, strength, and humour, play an important role when characters are assessed (Hoffner and Cantor 1991: 69–70). Furthermore, assessment also includes modifying factors to varying degrees: motives, intent or the lack of it, consequences for the actors and the individuals affected, as well as the contexts in which the action took place. These factors are not given equal priority. Motives, for example, are often considered more important than an action's consequences (ibid.: 71ff.). The same action is assessed differently depending on the agent's age, gender, and social role (ibid.: 73–74). Men who run in the presence of danger—like the antihero of *Force Majeure*—are judged more negatively than women who do the same; doctors who fail to help others in need are judged more negatively than laymen.

In film, major and minor actions are intentionally shaped by means of narrative, acting, and other filmic devices (see Chapter 7). While many acting styles aim at producing the most realistic characters and actions possible, others—as in Brechtian

theatre or Rainer Werner Fassbinder's and Giorgos Lanthimos' films—are rather intended to generate stylisation, rhythmisation, exaggeration, or an extreme type of physical expression. In silent film, facial expressions, gestures, and motion behaviour were exaggerated also to guarantee comprehensibility.

While artistic depictions of human physicality and behaviour tend to be oriented toward folk-psychological assumptions and cultural schemata, individual films and genres also generally deviate from them in specific ways. The behaviour of characters in James Bond movies, like that of heroes in folklore and medieval texts, is to a great degree formulaic, predetermined, and predictable, but behaviour can also intentionally be unpredictable and disrupt perception in a way similar to absurd theatre or surrealist film (*Un chien andalou*, *L'Âge d'or*; cf. Lotman 1993: 358). In addition, playing with the categories and conventions described above can serve to convey themes and symbolic meanings (see Chapter 11). The concepts employed to describe physicality and external actions are therefore of considerable importance for character analysis, and they also point out the need to go beyond them with the aspects of sociality and psyche.

6.3 Sociality

In most films, characters' sociality plays a central role; it is of less importance only in single-character stories or those with a few specific character types, such as monsters. Sociality involves all a character's social actions and relationships and their positions in social structures. This aspect is dealt with here, before we get to the character's psyche, for several reasons: sociality significantly influences personality and represents an important component of inner life; and the sociological models used to describe it are more general and less controversial than the psychological ones. Furthermore, depicting sociality explicitly is easier in film due to the intersubjective signals it involves. In the following section (and later in Chapters 9 and 10), the psychological dimensions of the social will be dealt with in greater detail.

Characters' social traits influence viewer reactions to a great degree. We not only categorise characters according to social aspects, as described in the previous chapter, we also react to them involuntarily in a social manner. We perceive them as potential friends or enemies, romantic partners or mentors, protectors or someone in need of protection, link social identities, interests and potential actions, assessments and affective responses with them. Different genres place the sociality of characters at the centre in different ways: melodramas or romantic comedies often focus on private love and family relationships, social problem films or committed documentaries on unjust conditions within a society, and political thrillers or war films on conflicts between states and other large groups. The manner in which characters' social traits are depicted normally permits conclusions about the film's central themes and the filmmaker's interests and values, meaning that they also represent an essential place where an analysis of characters as symbols and symptoms can start (see Chapter 11 and Chapter 12).

Basic Concepts of the Social

During character synthesis, we perceive and grasp a character's sociality by using various concepts and schemata, particularly ones from folk sociology and former media experiences (see Chapter 5). The character's external features and behaviour patterns—appearance, clothing, actions, language, and nonverbal behaviour—usually provide the basis for our judgements. Sociology and social psychology can explain and elaborate the implicit notions contained in folk sociology.⁸ These disciplines examine social actions and relationships between individuals and groups (microsociology), the mental assumptions and processes involved (social psychology), and the social systems and structures produced as a result (macrosociology). We can employ the categories they are based on for the purpose of grasping and describing sociality more precisely, in this way better understanding audience responses and reconstructing a film's themes. More specific theories of the social can usually not be applied automatically because they often go considerably beyond or deviate from folk-sociological assumptions—and therefore the foundations of character synthesis. But the most important basic concepts are widely shared across theories, and they are already very useful for analysing the sociality of characters:⁹

- social action, interaction, and social relationships;
- social systems, groups, and structures;
- social positions, roles, and status;
- social representations, values, and norms; and
- social identity.

Social action is '[...] goal-directed behaviour that refers in its intentions to the behaviour and the perceived or assumed expectations of the interaction partner and is oriented toward social norms and values' (Endruweit 2002: 211). An important form of social action is communication. Apart from intentional action and communication, there are various forms of unintentional, involuntary, unthinking social behaviour and nonverbal communication.

The behaviour patterns of almost all the characters in *Casablanca* are social in this sense. When Rick, despondent because of the situation with Ilsa, gets drunk by himself, this can only indirectly be termed a social action; but when he kisses Ilsa, talks to Sam, or holds Major Strasser at bay with a pistol, these are direct social actions. If social action—such as in these cases—is reciprocal, it is termed *interaction*. Social action and interaction take place in accordance with certain interests and motives and can

⁸ For more on folk sociology, see Zerubavel 1999; Hirschfeld 2001.

⁹ To clarify these terms, I have analysed two reference works in particular: the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Psychology* by Manstead and Hewstone 1999 and the *Wörterbuch der Soziologie* by Endruweit and Trommelsdorff 2002. See also the introduction in Bauman 2000 and the evaluation of social-scientific research for the fictional world theory in Doležel 1998: Chapter 3.

lead to cooperation, competition, or conflict between the individuals involved. Both of the agents possess a certain *power*, a certain ability to influence the other person's thoughts and behaviour through physical, mental, or social means in order to advance their own objectives (see Doležel 1998: 103). Rick employs physical power when he shoots Strasser, mental power when he fools Renault, and social power when he has his orchestra and guests drown out the singing Nazis with 'La Marseillaise'. The forms of power and interaction are regarded as being prioritised differently in various films: While the exercise of physical power dominates in action movies, social power is more important in melodramas.

When interpersonal interactions become constant over time, *social relationships* are formed in which the individuals involved are linked not only by social action and concrete influence on each other, but also cognitions and emotions, including reciprocal expectations, interests, and rules as well as common memories and plans for the future (Reis 1999). Important areas in social relationships are, for example, marriage, friendship, and work. Early in *Casablanca*, Rick's professional and institutional contacts are the main focus, followed by his romantic relationship with Ilsa. Relationships differ in terms of content (attractiveness, aggression, altruism, distribution of power), their duration and intensity, their consequences, and the degree of obligation, as well as the number of people or groups involved (Six 2002). In many cases, relationships exist for the purpose of exchanges of resources such as money, goods, services, love, status, or information (ibid.), or reaching other objectives such as self-understanding and the formation of personal or collective identities. Considered in an even more abstract way, the objective is frequently to maximise a common benefit by means of cooperation (Reis 1999). In a relationship, certain habitual and routine patterns of behaviour can develop, be stored in the partners' memories, and eventually be transferred to other relationships.

Individual personal relationships are normally elements of larger units with certain social structures: social networks, systems, or groups. A *social group* constitutes two or more individuals that represent a kind of unit, such as on the basis of common values, objectives, decisions, or rewards; the members' self-identification (group identity); exclusion from or by others; exchange of information or relationship structures (Witte 1999). Social groups can be organised according to the following categories:

- small groups (couples, work groups, gangs) and large groups (religions, nations, cultures);
- informally coordinated groups (e.g., families, groups of friends) that form through individual action and formally organised groups with explicit rules, roles, and hierarchies (e.g., companies, institutions) (Doležel 1998: 110–11);
- primary groups with intense relationships that have far-reaching effects (families) and impersonal, formal secondary groups;

- in-groups that individuals assign themselves to, and out-groups they distinguish themselves from; and
- reference groups forming normative standards for a characters' self-assessment (e.g., concerning morals, achievement).

Certain categories of large groups appear to be vitally important for human coexistence (Hirschfeld 2001): sex, gender, age, familial relationship, ethnicity, and language, and also economic classes and social milieus determined by mentality. Humans belong to various groups simultaneously. For example, Rick is a man, an adult, white, an American, an expatriate, a resident of Casablanca, and a member of further small groups, including the nightclub's staff and the former couple Ilsa and Rick. Since external relationships exist between social groups—friendship, enmity, cooperation, or rivalry—conflicts can also arise between their members. For example, the groups in *Casablanca* comprising Nazis, resistance fighters, refugees, Vichy French, and local residents are embroiled in conflict with each other, which is possibly most vivid in the famous 'La Marseillaise' scene. Telling examples of group conflicts in other films are the workers and capitalists in Eisenstein's or Loach's works, the Indians and British in *Gandhi*, or the clans in the film adaptations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. In most films however, small, personal primary groups such as families, friends, or couples are the focus—before the backdrop of larger social systems. Impressive examples of this are the lesbian love stories in *Carol* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*), which are set in the 1950s and the 1770s. Groups are structured internally in that they assign their members certain social positions and roles that shape their actions and relationships (Hogg 1999). A person's *social position* within a social system is determined as the point where their social relationships in it intersect (Lamnek 2002: 408). For example, Rick holds the position of owner in the system of the nightclub, and as a result, he has a variety of relationships with employees, guests, and representatives of the authorities, who expect certain things of him. Within this hierarchical system of the nightclub, Rick has achieved a high degree of status associated with power and recognition.

Social roles are a dynamic aspect of social positions; they are complexes of behavioural expectations that are familiar to the people performing these roles as well as their partners in interaction or the larger environment (ibid.; Griesse 2002). One expects that parents take care of their children and children obey their parents; or that a waiter serves guests and guests pay their bills and tip their waiters. More general than such specific primary and professional roles are global role constructs in large cultural groups, such as gender roles. Behaviour that conforms to roles is rewarded in a formal or informal way, for example through recognition or money; behaviour that does not conform is punished—with ridicule or even the death penalty. Because they are aware of such positive or negative sanctions, people learn to take on their roles.

The various roles that an individual takes on therefore provide a framework for their functions, potentials for action, and the structure of their relationships. Furthermore,

each individual normally assumes several different roles, which in all constitute a role set. This can lead to role conflicts: Rick joins the resistance fighters and has to give up his nightclub as a result. While Ilsa loves Rick, she is obligated, as a wife and member of the resistance movement, to support and not cheat on Victor Laszlo. The roles a person assumes, how they act in them, and how they resolve role conflicts depends on socioeconomic circumstances, situational influences, power structures, and also personal values and capabilities. Individuals are more or less capable of shaping their roles themselves or creating a *role distance* to them, creatively decoupling themselves when necessary, such as when Captain Renault re-interprets his role as the police chief: 'Round up the usual suspects'. Through their character constellations, films establish networks of relationships that are relatively large (epics) or more intimate (chamber dramas); their characters occupy various (status) positions and roles, have role sets of differing complexity (multidimensional main characters compared to one-dimensional secondary characters), and experience role conflicts of differing intensity.

Group categories, role expectations, and knowledge of sanctions belong to a larger context of collective contents of memory and discourse that are integrated into the mental dispositions of social individuals and significantly influence their thinking, feeling, and behaviour. These *social representations* include—among other things—languages, cultural archetypes, stereotypes and prejudices, religious beliefs, political ideologies, scientific knowledge, and other content from media and public discourses (see Doležel 1998: 101–02; Semin 1999). Social representations are often combined with collective affects and emotions such as national pride and racial hatred, and they include collective values and norms.

'A norm is a generally valid *behavioural rule*; other members of a society expect it to be observed and violations are met with negative sanctions' (Lamnek 2002: 386; italics in original). In the same way, social roles are linked to norms. Norms differ in terms of the degree of their acceptance, legitimacy, internalisation, sanctions, and interpretability; they range from embodied forms of politeness to written laws. While norms relate to specific situations and others expect that they will be observed, values are objectives and guidelines that can affect various situations, and that individuals or groups adopt more strongly themselves.¹⁰ Values serve as standards of desirable aspects when assessing others or oneself, when choosing and legitimising actions, and when developing attitudes. Briefly, values say 'what is good', while norms specify 'what should be done'—thus, they can also be regarded as concrete forms of values that relate to specific situations. Many social values can be categorised in the following areas: conformity, tradition, security, power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, and benevolence (Schwartz 1999, 2012). Which values characters follow and which norms they oppose significantly shapes their conflicts (Chapters 9, 10), the themes and effects of films (Chapters 11, 12), and affective audience responses (Chapter 13).

10 See Schwartz 1999, 2012 and also Chapter 9 in this book.

Norms and values form contexts or systems that are almost never wholly consistent and according to which one can behave in a more or less independent or conformist, dogmatic, or critical manner. Characters' decisions reflect the importance of certain norms and values. The world of *Casablanca* is full of norm and value conflicts, which manifest themselves in the conflicts between Nazis and resistance fighters and inner conflicts such as Ilsa's inability to decide between being faithful to her husband and her passion for Rick. At the same time, *Casablanca*'s norm structure is highly changeable and unjust, since the common right of the powers-that-be is employed arbitrarily. This is made most obvious in the scene where Renault has Rick's Café closed because of illegal gambling, while collecting his customary 'winnings' as a bribe at the same time. It goes without saying that all of *Casablanca*'s norms apply in a colonialist and patriarchal context.

Thus, the individual has a certain amount of freedom to decide and act, but only within a framework of social-group membership, roles, norms, and values. The accompanying social representations are learned in socialisation processes, internalised in part, and then contribute to the formation of an individual's *identity*. In the field of sociology, personal identity is understood as 'the subjective processing of biographical continuity/discontinuity and ecological consistency/inconsistency by an individual in light of self-expectations and social requirements' (Haußer 2002: 218). Social identity is defined as that part of the self-concept (or mental model of the self) that is formed by social categorisation and group membership. When dealing with their social environment and its demands, individuals self-categorise and create a self-concept or 'self-image' that is accompanied by a certain self-esteem and a 'conviction of control' relating to one's personal effectiveness (Haußer 2002: 220). At the same time, they attempt to recognise continuities within their biographies, identify a consistency in their own traits in various situations, develop principles and visions of the future, and reconcile subjective tendencies and social requirements. Since accomplishing all this is no simple matter and one's impression of oneself changes according to the situation, this represents a continuous process of identity formation. For example, Rick Blaine faces a crisis of identity construction, and viewers frequently employ such depictions of identity processes for forming their own identity. The character's proper name serves as a social sign of personal identity that is usually assigned in a socially conventionalised manner (see Chapter 7). Closely related to notions of identity are the concepts of 'lifestyle' and 'habitus' as systems of behaviour and comportment, which are determined not only through groups and roles, but crucially also through mentalities, aesthetic preferences, and matters of taste and affect.

The basic sociological concepts outlined here can be modified, made more specific, or complemented by various other approaches. For example, history provides descriptions of past values, norms, roles, groups, and psychoanalytic theories claim that interpersonal relationships are shaped most strongly by early childhood experiences in the familial primary group. Such conceptions will be discussed more closely in the following sections on character psyche.

Analysing Characters' Social Lives

At this point, I will only introduce the practical dramaturgical approach of Roland Zag (2005), because it explicitly foregrounds characters' sociality in a way that is useful for narrative analysis. Zag regards characters' embeddedness in a social network as being decisive for a film's success. In order for viewers to react to characters emotionally, they must, according to Zag, be embedded in a network of diverse and intense social relationships. In this view, the viewers' sympathy or antipathy¹¹ for characters depends primarily on their giving and taking, on the extent to which they provide relationship partners with material or immaterial goods—e.g., practical help or affection—and how much they receive in return. In the course of intensive mutual give and take, relationships become intense bonds. Should there be an imbalance, it will be regarded as a debt owed by one of the individuals involved. The characters' bonds can belong to one of eight types of social groups: couple, family, friendship, unequal partnership (e.g., teacher and student), teams and other medium-sized groups, countries, units based on ideas (science or art), and humankind as a whole. Furthermore, characters should remain true to themselves. The characters can encounter serious conflicts both within and between these 'loyalty levels', which intensifies the viewers' interest and emotions. Characters' relationships are not static, since they enter into bonds or attempt to free themselves from them, are forced to join them or are expelled.

Zag's screenwriting guide thus uses social science concepts to practically analyse sociality, focusing on relationships and group membership. However, the other concepts outlined above can also be employed for character analysis. I will attempt to show how by applying them—quite briefly—to Rick Blaine and *Casablanca*, which can also be seen as a summary.¹² The Second World War, in which Nazi Germany threatens the universal values of security, justice, and freedom as an aggressive large group and has turned many people into victims or resistance fighters, represents the social background of all characters' behaviour. At the film's beginning, a map of 'imprisoned Europe' and refugees fleeing to Lisbon and the United States are shown. As an intermediate stop, Casablanca is an enclave with a special legal status: officially part of 'independent' Vichy France, it is in reality controlled by Germany. The proper documents are required to enter and leave, and also to stay. A number of groups come together here: Nazi soldiers, Vichy French, refugees, resistance fighters, expatriates, and Moroccans, who are marginalised and stereotyped in the film. Conflicting values occupy the foreground in the relationships between these social groups and their members. The refugees want safety; the resistance fighters want freedom; the Nazis want to increase their power; the Vichy French want personal gain. For most of them, a great deal is at stake, and the opposing interests result in constant conflict potential.

11 While Zag speaks of 'empathy', I use the terms differently; see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14.

12 A number of suggestions are from the legal studies article '*Casablanca*: Judgment and Dynamic Enclaves in Law and Cinema' (Almog and Reichman 2004).

Casablanca has its own set of rules, and the despotic order there is based not on morals and justice, but corruption and arbitrary exercise of power. Raids, closings of bars and restaurants, black-market business deals, sexual coercion, and political murders are daily events, and power is distributed in an extremely unjust way. Captain Renault is the local representative of the legal system, and he also opportunistically bends to the pressure of the Nazi officers under Major Strasser, who unscrupulously pursue their own interests. We see them exclusively in their formal roles as soldiers, and in contrast to Rick and Renault, they seem not to have private lives. The normative background is unpredictable, creating tension and surprises from the viewer's point of view, making instances of implausibility in the story seem less tangible.

In Casablanca, Rick's exclusive nightclub—also an enclave with its own laws—serves as a meeting place for local residents and strangers, smugglers and merchants, gamblers and drinkers. 'Everybody comes to Rick's'. At his nightclub, Rick—one of Casablanca's powerful figures, a former resistance fighter, US citizen, and expatriate who for some reason cannot return—represents the main authority figure, makes rules, and occasionally breaks them: he does not drink with guests, but makes an exception for Ilsa and Laszlo. As the club's owner, Rick is embedded in a dense network of relationships with employees, authorities, regular guests, and lovers. Of all the film's characters, his has the most complex role set. He is the nightclub's manager, Sam's friend and boss, Renault's partner, host (including for the Nazis), secret sympathiser with the resistance groups, and most importantly the unlucky member of a romantic triangle with Ilsa and his rival, Victor Laszlo. Each of these roles involve expectations of actions and obligations. Rick's social roles and relationship patterns are also focused on different locations. He plays the role of nightclub owner in its public space; he acts as a planner and decision-maker in the backroom of the casino; and in his sparsely furnished apartment, he is a friend or a lover.

Rick has struck a deal with the corrupt French authorities, represented by Captain Renault. As long as Rick refrains from selling visas, he is permitted to deal on the black market and allow gambling in his nightclub in return for bribes. Rick and Renault are linked by a common basic principle, opportunistically maximising their own benefit, above and beyond which there is something like honour among thieves and mutual affection. Rick is bound to his piano player, Sam, in a hierarchical friendship. Other than that, Rick avoids emotional and political attachments and interacts with the outside world as little as possible, which obviously entails a poverty of emotions and ideals in his life and value system. The arrival of Ilsa and Laszlo upsets the balance in Rick's splendid isolation. His emotions become the driving force behind moral decisions, upheavals, and re-orientation in the social network.

Because of their love, Rick and Ilsa are embroiled in a conflict of strong and irreconcilable norms and values: passion versus a sense of obligation, love versus virtue, egotism versus altruism. This conflict must be resolved under pressure within a limited timeframe. Everyone involved in the romantic triangle makes a decision in

turn. Ilsa left Rick in Paris, resolving to stay with Laszlo. In *Casablanca*, Laszlo lets Ilsa decide whether to leave him. After Ilsa confesses her love to Rick, she passes the decision on to him: 'You've got to decide for both of us, for all of us'. Rick makes his decision in light of the higher norms and emotions of everyone involved, instead of according to how he will profit personally, as in the past. By doing so, he removes himself from almost all his past relationships, joins new groups, and repositions himself in the social network in a completely new way. Rick supports the refugees, gives up his status as the nightclub's owner, violates Vichy's unjust norms, and takes a stand with the resistance fighters against the Nazis' superior strength. He prioritises the attachment to universal human ideals (peace and freedom), the resistance fighters, and respect for the powerful obligations of others (Ilsa's marriage with Laszlo) over the values of love and personal safety. By doing so, he abandons the concrete external relationship with Ilsa, but softens this blow by keeping it alive in their memories: 'We'll always have Paris'. A further consolation is that he has a new friend: Renault, who joins him. And not least, Rick resolves his identity conflict and overcomes his tangible emotional emptiness through his decision. Rick transforms himself from an emotionally cold egotist, whose attractiveness was based on authority and power rather than 'giving' within social relationships, to a committed agent of change who is at peace with himself. This shift in roles further enables viewers to feel and sympathise with him.

In other words, *Casablanca* clearly shows that social systems are not so very firmly established and do not completely determine individual action, as some social-scientific approaches seem to claim. As a social system, *Casablanca* is quite unstable and dynamic, and circumstances change as a result of the characters' emotions and their search for integrity and the right thing to do. These individual factors prove to be stronger than external norms and existing roles. Many other characters' psychological changes are also accompanied by a repositioning in the social system and new relationships and group memberships. This often again calls attention to the significance of the aspect that will be dealt with next: the characters' individual psyche.

6.4 Psyche: Inner Life and Personality

Film is sometimes regarded as a medium of physicality and action that contrasts with books, abstraction, and introspection. Indeed, films make it possible to portray the sensory concreteness and dynamic movement of social interaction. At the same time, physicality and sociality are closely intertwined with the psyche, which is also a focus of attention in film. A significant aspect of the appeal of watching a film is inferring the characters' personalities and understanding their inner lives.¹³ We associate a

13 When characters' 'psyche', the 'mental', or 'consciousness' is mentioned below, this entails both the system of their long-term mental dispositions and their fleeting mental processes and states, and not only in the sense of consciousness, but mind, in other words to the exclusion of preconscious aspects

certain character with the external aspects of represented persons; explain their behaviour on the basis of mental motives; try to understand their worldview; and examine their affects, motives, inner conflicts, borderline situations, identity crises, or psychological anomalies. Film genres emphasise different aspects. Thrillers focus on fear, melodramas on suffering, horror films and pornography on sensations such as pain or lust. Detective films and caper movies concentrate on cognitive components and observe cool-headed detectives solving riddles and reaching conclusions. In mystery films, hallucinations and dreams play an important role. Action movies are dominated by the will and clearly defined objectives of active heroes, while character studies in art cinema explore complex inner conflicts and unconscious needs. Subsequent chapters will deal in greater detail with two areas of character psychology that are especially important. Motivation (Chapter 9) often represents the core of the character's personality and its interface with the plot, value system, character constellation, theme, and viewers' involvement. At the same time, feature film is also considered a medium of affect, sensation, and perception, not only for the viewer, but for the characters, too (Chapter 13 and Chapter 14). Viewers' affects and emotions are often aroused by intense depictions of a character's feelings, and their perceptions are often reproduced in point-of-view editing patterns or subjective sound.¹⁴

The previous chapters have shown that film viewers draw interconnected conclusions involving physicality, behaviour, sociality, and psychology when constructing their character models, employing their folk theories and other dispositions (including media-specific ones) in doing so. Even the description of external and social traits and behaviours is often inextricably linked to presuppositions concerning psychological matters. Films in no way suggest the characters' psyche merely through appearance, behaviour, and language; they can basically employ any audiovisual stylistic devices for this purpose (see Chapter 7): music, voice-overs, text inserts, symbols that serve as a leitmotif, emotional landscapes, camerawork, or rhythms of editing. Subjective camerawork and sound allow us to become direct witnesses to perceptions, dreams, and memories that convey motives and personality traits. The great white shark in *Jaws* is characterised as murderous by means of menacing music and its fixed gaze on swimmers, and the speed with which the underwater world passes by from its point of view reveals its quickness, size, and power. Perception and other psychological elements are provided here directly, and the physical in an indirect way. In a subtler form, the human point of view is an indicator of personality. What someone pays attention to, whether the gaze is rigid or restless, says something about them. Fantasies and dreams can also be used to characterise characters, such as the psychotherapist and the serial killer in *The Cell*.

of the mental. Lisa Zunshine emphasised the meaning of the psyche for literature (2006); a central function of all communication is conveying psychological processes (see Chapter 3).

14 Some films explore forms of perception that viewers are not wholly able to grasp directly, such as smell (*Perfume*) and taste (*La grande abbuffata* / *La grande bouffe*).

Other psychological processes and personality traits are, however, rarely provided in such a direct manner. The psyche normally represents not only the most important and complex aspect of the character model, it is also the most subjective and least explicit. The greatest differences found during analysis are in the area of the mental, and this is one of the most controversial areas in character theory. While some structuralists deny that we can ascribe psychological traits to characters, in general there is a consensus that doing so is reasonable, or in fact unavoidable, even beyond their explicit portrayal in the text (see Part I of this book). How far mental attributions can go beyond the filmic text, where the borders lie, and which concepts can be employed when grasping and describing a character's inner life and personality during analysis is answered differently by various approaches.

The simplest and most frequently applied method is proceeding intuitively when inferring a character's mental traits and naming them in everyday language on the basis of one's own implicit folk-psychological knowledge. There are, however, more nuanced methods of attributing mental traits to a character. In any case, this requires a suitable vocabulary and a complex system of interlinked concepts relating to the mental. A large number of heterogenous models that differ in terms of type, nuance, explicitness, scientific rigour, etc. are available for this purpose, and each of them involves certain research objectives, presuppositions, and procedures. They can be categorised in terms of the following three groups of methods, in which folk psychology represents an indispensable and unavoidable foundation, though it is also subjected to reflection, modified, or complemented by additional elements:

1. Scientific reconstructions of contemporary folk psychology: these are developed primarily in the field of empirical psychology and philosophy of mind (see Chapter 5). Such reconstructions represent attempts to make explicit how we automatically grasp other persons' inner lives and personalities, which is guided by everyday dispositions and prescientific assumptions made in the course of our efforts to infer and in how we categorise the results. Doing so involves the assumption that the fundamentals of folk psychology are commonly held, at least by contemporary viewers in Western cultures. Such reconstructions make it possible for us to become conscious of our own folk psychology, permitting us to systematically investigate certain trait areas of character psychology and determine the reception of 'average' contemporary recipients.
2. Historically and culturally specific concepts: many ideas concerning the human psyche are, however, more specific than past reconstructions through folk psychology, which were extremely general, or deviate from them, such as in myths and religions, philosophical movements, and (relatively old) empirical sciences. Filmmakers and viewers can be profoundly influenced by them. When analysis focuses on time-specific, culture-specific, or personal conceptions of the character's psyche, models of the mental that were or still are components of the filmmaker's and

viewers' mental dispositions must be employed. These dispositions can be identified in historical, ethnological, sociological, or biographical terms, and various cultural disciplines can contribute to this.

3. Current scientific disciplines: a third option is making use of current scientific disciplines that concern themselves with the human psyche. With the aid of advanced theories of the mental, an attempt can be made to perform a scientifically grounded analysis of a character's inner life, one which is as nuanced as possible, and therefore identify a mode of reception which may be considered in a sense 'ideal'. However, there is a wide variety of competing paradigms among current theories, particularly in cognitive psychology and psychoanalysis. In many available works of character analysis, selections from available theories—usually from the field of psychoanalysis (cf. for example Seger 1990)—are used in a relatively random fashion. The objective here is to examine and compare the spectrum's elements, which will permit a better foundation for choosing a theory.

In the following, these three approaches will be illustrated in simplified overviews. The purpose will be to recognise which options can be used systematically to obtain an adequate picture of the character's psyche.¹⁵ A relatively comprehensive depiction of the theoretical spectrum is necessary to develop a general heuristic, which will then be illustrated briefly with an example. The focus will be, once again, the most complex case: anthropomorphic characters. When applied to other characters, reductions would be conceivable, e.g., in the case of animal characters guided by instincts, and also additions such as superhuman abilities, for example with gods or aliens.

Folk-Psychological Concepts

As described in the preceding chapter, the development of character models is based on mental dispositions, many of which are also decisive when interacting with real people. Viewers apply implicit folk psychology to infer characters' inner processes and personalities, making use of a variety of methods (Malle 2007; Newen 2015). They imagine themselves as the character (simulation), project their own experiences onto it, draw conclusions on the basis of its behaviour, and fall back on implicit bodies of knowledge (Theory of Mind, naive personality theories).¹⁶

15 So far, the common character theories have provided only a limited number of clues for all three approaches. Structuralist/semiotic character theories consciously leave out the character's psyche or, at most, refer to codes not specified in detail. Hermeneutic approaches deal with conceptions of the figure specific to a time or a culture, or to individuals, but only address individual cases and fail to provide general structural models. Traditional psychoanalysis is still limited to the ahistorical area of the ideal reception. A highly nuanced model of the psyche that is full of assumptions would seem appropriate here, though at the same time, it contrasts starkly with the cognitive paradigm and parts of folk psychology.

16 Viewers explain the character's actions by drawing conclusions about concrete intentions on the basis

This use of folk psychology is essential for attributing mental traits to characters. We possess folk-psychological schemata for psychological processes (inner life) and dispositions (personality), and these schemata influence the way we talk about the character's psyche. Scientific reconstructions of folk psychology make its ideas explicit. One of its basic ideas is the intuitive differentiation between four groups of mental processes and states:¹⁷

- perceptions: seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling, tasting, etc.;
- cognitions: thinking (reasoning, memories, etc.) and opinions (expectations, assumptions, etc.);
- emotions: intense object-related emotions such as fear of something, and also less specific moods such as melancholy and physical sensations such as hunger; and
- motivations (and corresponding evaluations): intentions, needs, desires, goals, etc.

The conscious and unconscious processes of inner life are normally classified according to these four areas, which are closely interrelated; for example, perception often leads to knowledge or gives rise to reasoning and emotions that can then become motives for actions. Personality is also divided into four corresponding dispositions:

- perceptual dispositions, e.g., tendencies relating to seeing, hearing, and smelling;
- cognitive dispositions, e.g., intelligence, memory, and worldview;
- emotional dispositions, tendencies to experience particular emotions, e.g., timidity; and
- motivational and evaluative dispositions, which include personal inclinations (e.g., greed) and internalised norms and values (e.g., helpfulness).

Evaluation might also be considered separately as a fifth area of mental processes and dispositions.

Two other dimensions of personality involve behavioural forms rather than contents: abilities and weaknesses (e.g., intelligence or empathy) set possibilities and limits of behaviour. Behavioural modes (e.g., cautiousness or humour) determine the general nature of how one behaves.

of the behaviour they have observed and in light of certain factors (situation, abilities); these actions can have psychological origins (character's assumptions and wishes) and a certain causal past history (see Malle 2007). At the same time, the characters' personality tends to be regarded as being more important than the situation.

17 Simplified and modified from Persson 2003: 159–82; Asendorpf 2005: Chapter 1; see Chapter 5 of this book.

Of course, our folk psychology contains much more than this basic schema. How we think and speak about the myriad psychological phenomena includes, for example, numerous metaphors, some of them conceptual, that often compare inner aspects and physical experiences: love can be ‘powerful’, a ‘blockhead’ ‘breaks someone’s heart’. All kinds of media, such as self-help guides in books, magazines, and websites, communicate popular psychological content; give tips for readers’ love lives; and provide advice relating to self-display or interpreting body language. Psychoanalysis also has greatly influenced folk-psychological thinking; most Western viewers take discussion of repression, traumas, and the subconscious for granted.

Since this brings up the question of the extent to which folk psychology varies by culture and individual, I will limit myself here to the most general ideas, and additional aspects will be discussed in subsequent sections. The more precisely folk psychology is reconstructed, the more likely the reconstruction applies only to certain characters, time periods, and viewers. A useful rule of thumb to keep in mind is that more specific folk-psychological reconstructions are suitable for analysis when fairly recent mainstream films and empirical character reception of viewers from Western industrialised countries are involved. But how should one proceed with characters from the past, other cultures, or non-mainstream film productions (e.g., surrealist), or when attempting to infer past or non-Western audiences’ perceptions of such characters?

Culturally and Historically Specific Ideas Relating to the Mental

When we apply folk-psychological concepts in character analysis, this involves the problem of their specificity and variance. Filmmakers’ and viewers’ mental representations of the psyche are influenced by discourses in their time and culture, which include religious and mythical thinking, philosophy, and contemporary theories of (popular) science. A different approach begins precisely with this fact. Its objective is to infer the kind of character reception intended by filmmakers or which can be found among audiences in specific time periods and sociocultural contexts.¹⁸ For constructing a model of the character’s psyche, this means that the culturally and historically specific ideas about mental phenomena that influence the making and viewing of film must be made explicit, especially for contexts that deviate from contemporary Western folk psychology (e.g., early silent film, Asian film). Various disciplines are considered for this purpose: the history of mentality, ideas, or theories; sociology; personality and social psychology; cultural anthropology; ethnology; linguistics; and cultural studies.

The extreme diversity of culturally and historically specific models of the mental can be described in a comparison with folk psychology to obtain an approximate

18 Hermeneutic, semiotic, and cognitive character theories are similar in terms of the basic ideas that these mental assumptions of the filmmakers and recipients—their horizons (hermeneutics), codes (semiotics), or schemata (cognitivism)—must be taken into account when trying to grasp their intended or actual conception of the character’s psyche in the analysis (see Part I of this book).

orientation concerning the types and extents of their variation. The important differences relate primarily to the internal organisation of the mind, the focus within this division, and the relationships of the mental to the body, the outside world, and the hereafter. A number of concepts from foreign cultures and past time periods are also accessible here and today, and they can influence both filmmakers and viewers.

Religious, magical, and mythical models of the mind are often characterised by an extension through various mental abilities or powers that differ from folk psychology because of the assumed influence of supernatural actors or environments. Furthermore, specific thoughts and feelings are connected with religious and mythical experience. Characters can possess superhuman mental abilities; they can be controlled by fate or the gods. Behaviour can be explained through possession, divine inspiration, or mystical union with the divine. In addition, the psyche is often related not only to the body and a concrete environment, but also to the hereafter, where it continues to exist after physical death (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), or becomes part of a world soul (Pantheism and Buddhism). Accordingly, the transmigration of souls, memories of an earlier life, and premonitions of the hereafter are possible. Even in a number of Western film genres, religious, and mythical conceptions of the psyche are common, such as in film adaptations of religious texts and myths (Bible epics), fantasy and science-fiction films, or in the oeuvres of religiously influenced Western auteurs such as Robert Bresson.

Of course, further examples for the limitations of Western folk psychology can be found in the cinema of other world regions such as Asia. Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* hints at certain Buddhist ideas it is dealing with already in the title. Bollywood films of the 1950, such as *Jagte Raho*, *Pyaasa*, and *Guide*, often culminate in scenes of transcendence (see Pandit 2007). In them, the protagonists, after a period of suffering, experience a very specific emotion termed 'śānta rasa' in Sanskrit: this entails a feeling of freedom from suffering and desire, and peaceful, wondrous joy. According to Hindu theology, this emotion prepares an individual for an experience of mystical ecstasy. In the films named above, it is linked to certain visual and colour symbols in a mixture with Christian iconography. Recognising that a character is experiencing this specific emotion requires that viewers are familiar with it.

A number of differentiations of folk psychology can be found in the *history of philosophy*. Cognition, for example, is examined in detail in epistemology and philosophy of mind, as are emotion and motivation in practical philosophy, and these aspects are often assigned a very different significance. For example, rationalist positions emphasise the role of cognition while other, irrationalist positions consider emotional intuitions (Bergson) or prerational moods (Heidegger) more important. Some idealists reject basic assumptions of folk psychology in their entirety, such as by claiming that only the mind is real, while materialists reduce psychology to physical phenomena in the brain.

One example for the relevance of philosophical concepts is *I Heart Huckabees*. Many features of this comedy suggest that the development of its antihero, who is searching for meaning in his life, was inspired by the phases of Albert Camus' existentialism. He recognises the absurdity of existence, is in despair because of it at first, then has a number of borderline experiences before empathy with his opponent leads him to an attitude of solidarity and equanimity. A number of damning criticisms of this film can be explained by the fact that the reviewers failed to comprehend the protagonist's intellectual development or his behaviour because they did not possess the necessary philosophical background.

Various (*popular*) *scientific intellectual frameworks* are more widespread than philosophy, such as those concerning the relationship between body and mind (see Chapter 5). The types of ancient humoral pathology—sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic—are still familiar, as are the constitutional theories and how they distinguish between the dominant athlete, the easy-going pyknic, and the introverted leptosome. Physiognomy provides clues for drawing conclusions about personality on the basis of the face, while pathognomy examines the traces left by experiences, which are reflected in facial expression, and phrenology sees signs of mental characteristics in the shape of the skull.¹⁹ Such theories are of interest for character analysis, firstly, because they make explicit folk-psychological ideas from their time, and secondly, because they influence art, media production, and folk psychology, such as in terms of conclusions about the character's psyche on the basis of appearance. Even today, a number of self-help books that make use of popular science employ similar theses. The above examples represent only a selection, and the inclusion of other cultures and time periods results in an enormous variety of concepts of the mental.

Current Models of the Mind and Personality

Of course, the current scientific disciplines that deal with the psyche and consciousness are culturally and historically specific, as well. Employing them in analysis of character psyche means considering characters from a decidedly modern perspective, although the objective of such an analysis is to apply models of the mental that currently offer the most forceful explanations and are most certain. Which one this would be is, however, the subject of heated controversy. The essential approaches will be discussed here in somewhat greater detail because some of them are employed frequently for analyses in the fields of media studies and dramaturgical practice, while others that might be more suitable have rarely been noticed. Firstly, the fundamentals of three groups of theories will be introduced: psychoanalysis, cognitive sciences, and fictional world theories, some of which are based on analytic philosophy. In a second step, various psychological personality theories will be dealt with.

19 See Groddeck 1994; McNeill 1998; Oehler-Klein 1990. Numerous internet materials provide a rich store of visual material and historical information, e.g., Walsh 1996 and Gerlach n.d.

Psychoanalytic theories presumably represent the foundation used most often for analysing character psyche in media studies and media practice. Innumerable film interpretations are based on psychoanalytic concepts as a way to approach the characters. At the same time, their inner lives and viewer reactions are often described using the same models—though there is no obvious reason for doing so—and are closely linked by means of the concepts of identification or transference. For example, according to some interpretations, Rick Blaine goes through an Oedipal development in which he liberates himself from his ‘mother’, Ilsa, and learns to deal with his rival ‘father’, Victor Laszlo. Viewers allegedly identify with Rick and relive their own Oedipal conflicts (see Gabbard and Gabbard 1990).

In addition to media studies, psychoanalysis has also influenced folk psychology and film production. Acting teachers such as Lee Strasberg and directors such as Woody Allen use it as a guideline, and widely read guides for actors and screenwriters are devoted to its various forms (Blumenfeld 2006; Seger 1990). The performance of many actors, especially in so-called method acting, was shaped by the application of Freudian ideas (Figure 16).



Fig. 16 Some acting styles can be associated with psychological ideas—for example, Marlon Brando’s method acting in *A Streetcar Named Desire* suggests a psychoanalytic interpretation of the character, emphasising subconscious drives and impulses. (Dir. Elia Kazan, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1951, Warner Bros. Pictures. All rights reserved.)

However, the field of psychoanalytic theories is intrinsically heterogeneous (Fonagy and Target 2003). At this point, I will briefly present three variants: Sigmund Freud's traditional approach to psychoanalysis and the subsequent modifications of Jacques Lacan and various proponents of object-attachment theories.²⁰

Freud's model of the psyche, as is well known, emphasises the role of unconscious drives and their conflicts with reality and internalised norms.²¹ He organised the 'psychic apparatus' into three parts that interact in the form of conflict: the id (basic, instinctual drives, repressed elements), ego (reality check, regulation, and control of the drives), and the superego (internalisation of norms, conscience). Psychological processes and behaviour patterns are motivated primarily by the unconscious, which includes libidinous and aggressive drives, internalised norms, and suppressed desires. Relationships with other individuals are also determined unconsciously by their function as 'objects' for satisfying desires and drives, as a result of which their image is often distorted by idealisation, projection, or transference. When drives and desires are met with resistance from an external source or the superego, which gives rise to anxiety, the ego repels them by means of mechanisms such as rationalisation, regression, or repression. Desires pushed into the unconscious retain their dynamism and return in the form of symbols, dreams, parapraxis or slips, or other behavioural impulses.

The id, ego, and superego are formed during several phases in an individual's development from child to adult, which Freud characterised in terms of how they relate to physical desire (oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital phases). Processes that shape the personality take place at the same time, including Oedipal desire and identification with the parents. When someone experiences insufficient pleasure during one of these phases, they can become fixated and, for example, be caught in a never-ending search for oral satisfaction. If an individual experiences too much pleasure during a certain phase, regression may be the result. Several character types can be identified according to such dispositions: oral (quiet, self-centred), anal (tidy, stingy), and phallic (aggressive, freedom-loving). The conflicts between the id, ego, and superego result in the development of personality dispositions—sometimes in pathological form—such as neuroses that strive to obtain vicarious sexual satisfaction (e.g., 'hysteria').

Other psychoanalytic positions have further developed and modified Freud's approach. For example, Jacques Lacan emphasised strong feelings of inadequacy and childhood dependence, the narcissistic desire for (and imagined sense of) wholeness and omnipotence, the linguistically structured nature of the conscious and unconscious, identificatory and imaginary relationships, the complex structure and unrealisable nature of desire, and the role of certain sexual dispositions such as the Oedipus complex (Lacan 2006; Pagel 1989).

20 This does not cover the field in its entirety; Linda Seger's screenwriting manual, for example, is based on C. G. Jung's character typology (1990; see Chapter 5 of this book).

21 Freud 2000; Fisseni 2003: Chapter 6; Blumenfeld 2006: Chapter 1.

Various theories on object attachment, such as those developed by Melanie Klein and John Bowlby, again have a different focus.²² Their basic idea is that early experiences with the relationship with 'objects'—most importantly attachment figures—are embedded into an individual's emotional memory, thereby influencing both the individual's own behaviour in later bonds and also their perception of relationships in general. According to these theories, the libidinous, frightening, frustrating, or conflict-ridden experiences that viewers have had with parents, siblings, or partners determine their assessment of characters, and their behaviour and psyche. For example, a character might remind a viewer of their strict father, as a result of which the viewer assumes that other characters' relationships resemble their own.

Thus, psychoanalytical approaches develop rich, though in no way uniform, concepts according to which characters can be attributed various specific kinds of psychological traits. When this happens, certain aspects of the psyche are emphasised, in particular their confrontational nature, drives, and desires, the unconscious and the suppressed, the connection with intense social relationships, (sexual) dispositions that arose during early childhood, and pathological personality dispositions.

In contrast, the *cognitive sciences* begin with a systematic examination of information processing, comprehending, and problem-solving. A human is viewed as a being that processes information—internal and external stimuli and representations—by means of cognitive and affective processes on the basis of a certain mental architecture.²³ Various models of mental processing can be linked with one another (see also Hogan 2003a: 56). Expressed in extremely simplified terms, consciousness is usually divided into several functionally determined areas: modules that take in sensory impressions or perform specific tasks (sensory systems, the linguistic system), a working and a long-term memory, a central executive instance that unites the contents of these modules, and an emotional system that triggers affective reactions and stimuli for action.

Cognitive theories have still rarely been used for analysing character psyche. The literature theorist Uri Margolin was one of the first scholars to suggest employing their underlying concepts, including their precise modelling of reception, internal representation, storage, and transformation of information (2003: 271–72, 283). Margolin demonstrates what this entails, using the literary depiction of visual perceptions as an example. The cognitive models direct the viewer's attention to the often unusual forms of information processing that are also depicted in film: raw sensory impressions, disruptions of the perception system, recognition, equivocal categorisation, selective attention, a child-like perspective, the influence of drugs or hallucinations (ibid.: 279). Cognitive processes can also be described at the level of dialogue and narration through language. In this context, Margolin emphasises, among other things, the specific types of selection and bundling of information, categorisation, drawing of conclusions, and judging. In other words, cognitive theories

22 For a brief overview, see Blumenfeld 2006: Chapter 3.

23 See Part I of this book and Asendorpf 2005: 66–83; Margolin 2003; Hogan 2003a.

most importantly permit more detailed description of processes that folk psychology also tries to grasp.

Fictional world theories, which have rarely been employed for analysing characters (Ryan 1991; Doležel 1998), are also based on cognitive psychology and analytic philosophy. Their basic underlying idea is that texts create fictional worlds that encompass characters' mental 'worlds of ideas'. Proceeding from modal logic, Lubomír Doležel discusses four areas of a character's consciousness: mental abilities, knowledge, desires, and internalised norms (1998: 113–32). He also derives three important motivational factors from behavioural modelling in motivational psychology: physical drives, emotions, and practical thinking. In addition, Doležel points out psychological phenomena that do not relate to action: contemplation, imagination, and involuntary mental events such as obsessions, associations, and daydreams. These categories correspond for the most part to folk psychology or can be integrated into its basic pattern relatively easily in order to obtain a more nuanced description.

Thus, fictional world theories, cognitive sciences, and psychoanalysis each provide a wide range of concepts for analysing character psyche. At the same time, however, these concepts are so heterogeneous that completely different results would be obtained by applying them in analysis. Psychoanalytic approaches foreground the psyche's internal conflicts and fragility, focusing above all on motivational aspects such as drives, desires and sexuality, psychological conditions for social interaction, pathological personality dispositions, and dispositions from early childhood. Approaches based on cognitive sciences, on the other hand, make use of a much more general model of structures, content, and human information processing, which are conceived universally and further differentiated in terms of their microstructure. At present, the focus is on successful cognitive processes of a relatively basic nature, while treatment of more complex emotional processes and mental personality dispositions is just beginning. While the fictional world theories are closer to folk psychology than the other groups, the tools they use are more uniform. In this case, too, choosing certain concepts for analysis needs to be justified.

This problem becomes more acute when the area of *personality* is examined more closely. Scientific theories offer more nuanced models in this area, as was already made clear through the description of psychoanalysis. In the discipline's literature, personality theories are grouped together, although they differ in terms of how the architecture of the consciousness, the essential mental processes, behavioural causes, and relevant methodology are conceived.²⁴ Following Anthony Walsh (1996), four basic forms of determining and describing personality can be distinguished:²⁵

- external determination: conclusions are drawn concerning an individual's inner traits on the basis of external features (e.g., behaviourism, physiognomy, and constitutional types);

²⁴ Asendorpf (2005) speaks of psychoanalytical, behaviouristic, trait, information-processing, dynamically interactionistic, and evolution-psychology 'paradigms'. See also Butler and McManus 2003: 129–30; Fisseni 2003: 25–26.

²⁵ The distinction comes from an online publication by Walsh, which is no longer accessible.

- holistic determination: the personality is conceived as the totality of all personal traits and experiences (that can never be grasped in its entirety) (e.g., hermeneutic interpretation);
- determination of essence: mental dispositions are regarded as being based on some essential core (e.g., a particular interrelationship between the id, ego, and superego); and
- determination of traits: the personality is characterised by its specific expression in various traits.

Trait-related approaches are particularly informative when investigating characters. They dominate the field of psychology, but have rarely been employed when analysing film.²⁶ Using statistical methods, some of them reduce the variety of human traits to a manageable number of especially important and varying dispositions that can be expected to permit description of the personality's core.²⁷ This produces personality inventories, which can serve as initial reference points in the analysis. The inventories that exercise the greatest influence have long been familiar as the 'Big Five', which are five higher personality dimensions derived through a laborious lexical and empirical method.²⁸ Each of these general trait dimensions can be broken down into more detailed subfactors; in other words, they cover an area of similar traits. Normally, only one pole is mentioned for each dimension, and its opposite is implicitly assumed. Due to the initial letters of the five personality dimensions, some also refer to the 'OCEAN model':

1. Openness to experience/culture/intellect: To what extent is the individual open to and interested in new ideas, creative processes, and unfamiliar norms and values? How should they be classified with regard to imagination, aesthetics, feelings, education, and taste?
2. Conscientiousness: To what extent does the individual make efforts, e.g., during problem-solving? To what extent are they characterised by competence, love of order, sense of duty, striving to achieve, self-discipline, level-headedness, perseverance, or reliability?
3. Extraversion/surgency: To what extent does the individual seek external stimuli and approach others? To what extent do they exhibit sociability, assertiveness, activity, a desire for social experiences, cheerfulness, or impulsiveness?

26 See Asendorpf 2005: 36–65; Butler and McManus 2003: 129; Fisseni 2003: 313–410.

27 See Asendorpf 2005: 144–45; for this reason, Fisseni speaks not of trait paradigms, but of factor-analytic approaches (2003: 314).

28 See Asendorpf 2005: 146–51. The starting point is provided by the dictionary: According to semantic criteria, approximately 18,000 English words used to designate traits were reduced to broadly synonymous groups. These terms were then compiled on the basis of empirical investigations in which test subjects assessed themselves and others in terms of 430 dispositions to act with the aid of factor analysis. The resulting five factors have been verified in numerous checks.

4. Agreeableness: To what extent does the individual exhibit inner affection and external charm when dealing with others? To what extent are they characterised by trust, candour, altruism, a willingness to compromise, modesty, kind-heartedness, warmth, or helpfulness?
5. Neuroticism/emotional instability: To what extent does the individual tend to experience mood swings and negative feelings? To what extent are they inclined to timidity, irritability, depression, social inhibition, or vulnerability?

Such questions can help when describing a character's personality in greater detail without overlooking important aspects. Furthermore, combinations of the five dimensions are also important: shyness is the result of a high degree of emotional instability and a low degree of extraversion. Certain elements of the Big Five are seemingly valid across cultures and a link could be established between them and historically and culturally specific concepts. For example, the various types in the field of humoral pathology—such as a melancholy individual and a sanguine one—differ due to varying degrees and combinations of extraversion and neuroticism (see Asendorpf 2005: 171).

When identifying the elements of the Big Five, however, 'attitudes and values, traits related to health and sexuality, and others that are highly socially desirable or undesirable' (Asendorpf 2005: 148) are systematically excluded. Of course, these are personality areas that are particularly interesting for character analysis. It is possible to fall back here on more comprehensive factor-analytical models, but they have not been subjected to exhausting empirical examination. In the 'Big Seven' model, the factor of culture and openness is replaced by that of conventionality and the areas of positive and negative valence are added, i.e., the degree to which someone possesses traits that are considered positive or negative. The model of Sixteen Personality Factors (*ibid.*: 141–42), which will be discussed below, is more detailed and comprehensive.

These empirically derived personality inventories can be useful for character analysis as heuristics, though they may be too incomplete and schematic for certain objectives. Another option would be to start with the premise of *general psychological functions*, following the psychologist Jens Asendorpf (2005: Sections 4.3 to 4.7). In this approach, the personality is categorised according to the following areas:

1. Abilities are an individual's characteristics in terms of achievement and opportunities for action, particularly in the form of intelligence, creativity, and social and emotional competence (assertiveness and ability to have relationships).
2. Temperament refers to an individual's characteristics 'in terms of emotional reactivity, physiological excitability, and attention control' (Asendorpf 2002: 399).

3. In the area of motivation, Asendorpf distinguishes between:
 - action traits, the individual's characteristics in the area of needs, motives, interests, goals, action beliefs (e.g., pessimism), attributive styles (e.g., apportioning of blame), and coping styles; and
 - assessment characteristics, characteristic features in the area of values and specific attitudes toward concrete issues.
4. Self-referential dispositions relate to the area of an individual's identity: the specific features of their self-concept, self-perception, self-esteem, and satisfaction with life.

The plausibility of Asendorpf's categories is supported in that various psychological works deal with such dimensions of personality in a similar fashion.²⁹ In the final analysis, the psychological trait paradigm and its personality inventories as well as functional models are intended most importantly to systematise and increase the precision of folk psychology. In contrast to psychoanalysis, its models serve less to explain psychological phenomena than to describe and classify them. At the same time, they intentionally tend to simplify. For this reason, the purpose of analysis must not be to 'check off' characters' traits according to these patterns, thereby schematising interpretation processes, but to make use of the models as a source of inspiration without a specific result in mind.

The concepts in contemporary scientific disciplines that have been presented above—psychoanalysis, cognitive sciences, fictional world theories, and personality psychology's trait paradigm—provide various alternative heuristics that can be quite useful for character analysis. They can aid in making conclusions about a character's psychological traits on the basis of their appearance; describing them in more precise language, or enable description of them in the first place; inferring new aspects of the mental; explaining puzzling matters; sharpening observation; permitting new kinds of interpretations; or creating a link to contemporary phenomena.

However, there are also limits to the use of current scientific theories in analysing a character's psyche. Scientific concepts are suitable for reconstructing the *intended and empirical* character reception only when they correspond to the filmmaker's and viewer's folk-psychological ideas and bodies of knowledge and simply make them explicit. Since the intention of current theories goes beyond this, and filmmakers or viewers (few of whom are well versed in psychoanalysis or cognitive science) cannot be presumed to be familiar with them, the current scientific disciplines are more suitable for obtaining an *ideal* understanding of the character's psyche. Since this ideal depends on how successfully the film communicates and on taking production and

29 Despite a few terminological and conceptual differences, coinciding distinctions in the works of leading personality psychologists such as Guilford, Cattell, and Eysenck, and to some extent Allport, suggest these essential areas (see the description of their approaches in Fisseni 2003).

reception into account, ‘ideal interpretations’ may be invalid if they neglect intended or empirical reception. Furthermore, they can never be final and undisputed, as the sciences on which they are based not only compete with each other, they also change over time and influence folk-psychological ideas to varying degrees.

Analysis of Character Psychology: A Heuristic and the Example of Rick Blaine in *Casablanca*

Returning to the initial question of which concepts are suitable for analysis of a character’s psyche, the following can be said: there exists a wide variety of extremely different models, ranging from folk psychology to the entire field of historically and culturally specific ideas and the competing positions in contemporary science. However, this spectrum has not been systematically investigated for analysis of characters, and the use of concepts up to now often seems arbitrary. The following criteria can be used as a guide for making a well-founded selection:

- Do I want to reconstruct the ideal, intended, or empirical character reception? If the latter is the goal, which target audiences in which cultural contexts are involved? Do the available concepts correspond to the filmmakers’ or viewers’ mental assumptions (their folk psychology)?
- Which reception theory do I consider generally valid, and which concepts of character psychology is it compatible with? Beginning with a cognitive reception theory and then describing characters with the aid of certain psychoanalytic approaches (or vice versa) can result in inconsistencies.
- Do the types of film and character suggest the selection of certain concepts, such as psychoanalysis for Woody Allen characters? Do certain psychological aspects stand out from the very beginning?
- Which aspects do I find particularly interesting, and which alternative approaches are at all available to examine them? Should I intend, for example, to describe the personality as exactly as possible, there is little that surpasses the psychological trait models.
- How much effort can be invested in the analysis, how easily can the concepts be applied, and how explanatory are they? Should I make do with simpler concepts such as those in folk psychology, or can I employ others that go into more detail, such as cognitive sciences or psychoanalysis?

A detailed check of all the options these criteria produce would be excessive. Instead, I would like to suggest a relatively simple heuristic that combines the various concepts in a flexible manner. The initial objective in this exemplary case is to determine the empirical character reception among a majority of adult Western viewers. This heuristic can be adapted by reprioritising the concepts to match other analysis objectives.

In agreement with cognitive reception theories (see previous chapters), folk psychology represents an essential reference point in my heuristic. Despite the influence of postmodern theorems relating to the dissolution of the subject, and in spite of deterministic concepts from the neurosciences or psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious, folk psychology still represents the foundation on which most people form an impression of others (and of characters). Even when the science used for a large number of their assumptions could be corrected, both philosophical and empirical investigations indicate that basic folk-psychological terms are employed by most members of Western cultures and remain a constant and indispensable foundation of all thought about the mental.³⁰ Throughout the history of Western philosophy, but also in Indian thought and in more recent works in cognitive science, the psyche has regularly been divided into three parts: the powers of reason, emotion, and will, or cognitive, affective, and motivational/volitional powers (with perception being treated as a special form of cognition).³¹ As a result, many positions in the mainstream of philosophy and the modern sciences largely correspond with reconstructions according to folk psychology, at least in terms of the basic organisation of the psyche. In addition, the sciences usually focus only on selected aspects of the psyche, and when detailed theoretical modelling meets its limitations, folk psychology again comes into play.

And so I come to my heuristic, which comprises three steps:

- step 1: application of a folk-psychological basic model, possibly made more nuanced with cognitive-scientific concepts;
- step 2: application of psychological personality inventories and functional models; and
- step 3: application of historically and culturally specific and psychoanalytic concepts. Should there be unequivocal signs that they are significant, e.g., for filmmakers and viewers who are clearly influenced by religion or psychoanalysis, this last step can come first.

I will illustrate this method briefly—without claiming to be exhaustive—using Rick Blaine as an example. This will begin with the folk-psychological division of inner life and personality into perception, cognition, emotion, and motivation. Examining which of the character's more specific processes and dispositions are portrayed, emphasised, or marginalised in each of these areas will provide an initial impression of his psyche. More precise examination of his inner life will differentiate the folk-psychological

30 See Searle 1994: 58–63; Zebrowitz 1990: 30; McCrae 2002.

31 See LeDoux 2003: 233–341. For a brief overview from a psychological perspective, see Scherer 1994. See also Diessner, Frost, and Smith 2004. Parallels between modern psychology and ancient Indian thought are outlined in Rao and Paranjpe 2016. An outline from a philosophical point of view can be found in Lenzen 2004. In French rationalism (Descartes) and English empiricism (Locke, Hume), the three-way division is reduced in part to a comparison of reason and will or passions. Of course, the philosophical discussion about these matters is actually much more complex (e.g., see Crittenden 2012).

organisation according to cognitive-science concepts and fictional world theories, for example as follows:³²

- Perception: What does the character's attention focus on? Which internal and external sensory impressions does it pick up? Are there any conspicuous elements, disruptions, or anomalies?
- Cognition: What conscious experiences does the character have? In what form do they provide information, and are they simplified or distorted? How does the character store the information in memory, and are there any gaps in memory? What makes the character stand out in the areas of drawing conclusions, making judgements, problem-solving, and decision making?
- Emotion/affect: Which basic affects, moods, and complex emotions are triggered by perception and cognition? How intense, pleasant, or unpleasant are they? Are these universal primary emotions such as joy, or very specific emotions such as Weltschmerz?
- Motivation/evaluation (see Chapter 9): Which physical drives, which affects and cognitions, which considerations relating to common sense, which action plans and objectives motivate the character's behaviour? Which values and internalised norms does the character employ as guidelines for evaluation and behaviour?

Beginning with especially conspicuous, foregrounded, or repeated representations of a character's inner life and drawing conclusions about his or her personality on this basis is often advisable. The representation of Rick's *perception* concentrates largely on the visual—with the exception of his reactions to dialogues and the musical leitmotif 'As Time Goes By'. What stands out here is the alternation between three types of gazes. In his role as a nightclub manager and in situations where decisions must be made, such as when guests try to enter the café, Rick often has a casually *controlling* gaze (which can be followed by a look directed at his employees that communicates a signal). During a conversation with male acquaintances such as Renault, he often has an *absent* gaze, his eyes looking past the other person and into space (Figure 17). While speaking with Ilsa, on the other hand, his *captivated* gaze is clearly shown through point-of-view editing and close-ups of her face. In each of these cases, his perception—which is never clouded—shows a different form of attention: problem-solving, reflection, or fascination. And three different facets of Rick's personality are suggested at the same time: he is obviously prepared to respond quickly and is thoughtful as well as passionate.

32 On the compatibility of models: Cognitive theories and the trait paradigm from the field of personality psychology represent a 'global paradigm that at present conforms to nearly the entire field of empirical personality research' (Asendorpf 2005: 116). Fictional world theories are also based on this paradigm in part. Furthermore, a few newer approaches in psychoanalysis are compatible with it, and it also shows far-reaching correspondences with folk psychology and analytical philosophy of mind.



Fig. 17 Rick's absent gaze during a conversation with Captain Renault in *Casablanca*. (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.)

The *cognitive* traits addressed here are reinforced by additional evidence. Rick playing chess in the nightclub's hustle and bustle shows him to be an introverted strategist; at a later point, he works out a complicated rescue plan for Ilsa and Laszlo. During conversations, he reacts quick-wittedly and laconically, a sign of agile intelligence. This combination of quick reactions, a capacity for reflection, and social intelligence seems to be part of what justifies his high status. Rick's thoughts essentially revolve around three matters: Ilsa's presence and unavailability, solving concrete problems involving the nightclub (guests, raids, etc.), and his past, part of which is revealed in a flashback showing his time with Ilsa in Paris.

This single flashback is also of prime importance for grasping the *emotional* area. At first, Rick's emotionality is characterised through a great deal of reserve, softened by sarcastic humour, and interrupted by scattered emotional moments. From the very beginning, he seems calm and free of anger and anxiety (he does not allow obnoxious guests to upset him), though at the same time serious and more or less unable to experience positive feelings and relatively unemotional when dealing with most people. While he is caught up in a network of weak sympathies (Renault) and antipathies (Strasser) within his social environment, and the respectful behaviour of this environment's members indicates that he stands out less due to emotional coldness

than coolness, in other words a controlled external management of inner sensitivity, this coolness turns into cruelty when he aggressively rejects Yvonne. His obvious efforts at controlling himself when seeing Ilsa for the first time, his emotional outburst, and the flashback showing him as a happy and gentle lover, prevent us from regarding Rick as unemotional or cruel. This makes the loss of Ilsa seem to be a lasting, traumatic rupture that has turned Rick's former sensitivity into coldness. Rick seeing Ilsa again is the start of a complex emotional episode that develops from feelings of frustration and self-pity, contempt and aggression, to a wavering between attraction and fear of new injury, then to conflict between new feelings of love, hope, desire, moral qualms, fear of loss, worry, and sympathy for his rival, Laszlo—which leads to an emotional crisis that is overcome at the film's conclusion.

The emotional conflict involving Ilsa and Laszlo is also the core of the *motivation* driving Rick's actions until his decision to give Ilsa up and join the resistance (see Chapter 9). The spontaneous, aggressive impulses to humiliate Yvonne and Ilsa appear to depend more on the situation than his personality. The return of Rick's ability to feel empathy shows itself in his support of Laszlo and the Bulgarian refugee couple. In addition to practical and instrumental considerations and more complex plans, Rick's actions are essentially guided by general principles and values, at first by his own personal rules, a feeling of responsibility toward his employees, safety concerns, egotism, and a desire to isolate himself from the world outside the café. As alluded to in the section on sociality, these values change gradually but fundamentally: a sense of responsibility and respect for marriage bonds win out over passion; altruism is victorious over egotism. The values that come out on top in the end were already imputed to Rick, by Renault, and he is obviously returning to his past idealism.

A folk-psychological approach thus leads to a few of Rick's central features: in the area of perception, he is characterised by the alternation between controlling, absent, and captivated gazes, while Rick's cognition is shown in presence of mind, the capacity for reflection, and social intelligence. His emotionality is initially distinguished by (excessive) self-control and coolness, even coldness; at Ilsa's arrival, the emotional episode involving his confrontation with himself and her begins. This inner conflict drives his behaviour and begins a struggle between egotistical and altruistic values. Of course, this represents only a selection of the qualities that are actually grasped in the course of reception. Examination of the personality can be made more detailed by including psychological personality inventories and functional models:

- The Big Five represents the most economical of the personality inventories: How great is the character's neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness, and what other traits are produced by combinations of these five dimensions? A more detailed alternative is the model of sixteen personality factors (revised 16 PF), which is currently used in employment tests. It includes the following

trait dimensions:³³ (1) warmth (e.g., enjoyment of the closeness of others), (2) emotional stability, (3) dominance, (4) liveliness, (5) rule-consciousness, (6) social boldness, (7) sensitivity, (8) impression management (e.g., processing of anger), (9) vigilance, (10) abstractedness (e.g., daydreaming), (11) privateness (reserve), (12) apprehension, (13) openness to change, (14) self-reliance, (15) perfectionism, and (16) tension.

- Asendorpf's functional model represents a useful complement to the personality inventories, and also elaborates the folk-psychological personality concept in another sense. It can be used to ask what sets characters apart in terms of their mental abilities (intelligence, creativity, social competence), temperament (sensitivity, emotionality, attention), action traits (needs, interests, motives, action beliefs, coping styles), assessment characteristics (general values, concrete attitudes), and self-referential dispositions (self-concept, self-perception, self-esteem, satisfaction with life).

When analysing Rick, I will first limit myself to the Big Five. It is notable that apparent contradictions can be found in four of the five dimensions. It can be said that Rick has a high degree of *conscientiousness*. His control over business at his nightclub is total, he has an ongoing deal with Renault, and he sets rules for himself, e.g., his refusal to drink with guests is clear to his employees. The fact that he violates this rule with Laszlo and Ilsa and then Strasser only demonstrates how exceptional these situations are. However, seemingly paradoxical personality traits manifest themselves within the four other dimensions. Although by insisting on rules, exhibiting little interest in other people, and wanting to maintain the status quo at the nightclub at any price, Rick shows little *openness*, he has obviously led an adventurous life that has taken him from New York to Casablanca. His subsequent choice to own a nightclub, which involves a great deal of contact with others, suggests *extraversion*. However, he sits in the middle of the hustle and bustle, isolated and controlling what happens, avoiding contact with his guests and playing chess by himself. Although he initially demonstrates a low level of *agreeableness* in his dealings with others, shows his egotism openly, and is imperious with the bartender, sarcastic with Renault, cold with Ugarte, and cruel to Yvonne, he enjoys everyone's admiration and recognition and is desired by women. And although Rick initially seems *emotionally stable* and controlled, he has an outburst of sentimental despair and self-pity because of Ilsa.

These four paradoxes contribute to Rick's multidimensionality and prove that finer internal differentiations of traits are necessary when applying the Big Five (Rick is introverted, but solely in certain regards or for certain reasons). Above all, they illustrate

33 This is a translation of Schneekloth and Graf's German version (Asendorpf 2005: 141–42).

how characters' powerful dynamic of change must be considered when analysing personality. All four paradoxes can be explained or resolved if we understand that Rick, when we meet him at the film's beginning, 'isn't himself' and that he is 'actually' not only conscientious, but also open, extroverted, friendly, and emotionally stable in a more positive sense. Apparently, being disappointed by Ilsa has made him withdrawn, introverted, unfriendly, and depressive, though the individuals in his environment can still sense his earlier character traits. In other words, characters are not just what they are in the present; they are also what they were in the past, what they will be, could be, or could have been. Rick is not merely the egotist of the present, he is also the happy and affectionate lover of the past, and the virtuous freedom fighter of the future.

The concepts from Asendorpf's functional model of the psyche permit further differentiation that will be briefly suggested here. Some of Rick's above-average *abilities* with regard to his intellect have already been mentioned; on top of that, his plan to save Ilsa and Laszlo demonstrates creativity, and his job requires a considerable amount of social competence. However, he seems barely fit for a relationship. His *temperament* can be described as cool. Coolness entails control, both internal and external, over feelings of weakness and social dependence, in other words anxiety, uncertainty, vulnerability, a desire for recognition, and also aggression. Rick is obviously thoroughly attentive and sensitive, though he has distanced himself from his environment and created a shell of emotional control due to his past emotional injuries. Among his *action traits*, defence and repression as ways of coping are particularly noticeable, and he has not been able to overcome being disappointed by Ilsa, which makes him distrustful and pessimistic, particularly when dealing with women. His need for love is shown clearly by his despair. Rick's *assessment traits*, his general values and concrete attitudes, change from egotism to altruism, from neutrality to taking sides, from anger at Ilsa to selfless love.

The model makes interesting new aspects visible in the area of Rick's *self-related dispositions* and identity. Although he demonstrates a considerable amount of self-confidence when dealing with others, satisfaction with his life seems to be lacking. Rick is withdrawn and rarely smiles; his comments are bitter and sarcastic. Being disappointed by Ilsa represents a traumatic rupture in his biography that has led to the paradoxes in his personality described above. The amount of damage to his self-esteem is revealed in his dealings with Ilsa. The change in his values and his decision to subordinate his personal interests for the common good is apparently what enables him to clear matters up with himself and his environment. In this way, *Casablanca* conveys the message that successful identity formation, while it requires a significant amount of sacrifice, is in the end more satisfying than continuing to live with an internal contradiction.

The steps in analysis so far broadly correspond with folk psychology and are intended to be descriptive; for this reason, their results are possibly more explanatory than surprising. On this foundation, more complex models of the psyche that deviate further from the basics of folk psychology can be included in a third step:

- religious and mythical ideas;
- philosophical theories;
- historically and culturally specific theorems; and
- forms of psychoanalysis.

Applying such concepts can produce results that seem less obvious. My heuristic requires, however, that those results do justice not only to the film and the objectives of analysis but also consider the role of (historical and cultural versions of) folk psychology in the specific case.

Most Western viewers are influenced primarily by Christianity, but religion, myth, and philosophy do not seem to play a significant role for understanding Rick's psyche, and there are no clear reasons to see them involved. Popular media texts conveying ideas of romantic love are presumably more important among the historically and culturally specific influences. This knowledge includes popular-psychoanalytic ideas that have entered folk psychology. In addition, certain concepts from psychoanalysis or psychotherapy can help make implicit views of the character explicit, further refine the character model, or offer explanations that go beyond folk psychology without contradicting it. A few examples are suggested below. For example, according to object-attachment theory, one can say that Rick has a 'dismissive attachment style' (Asendorpf 2005: 292–97) that—like his depressive coldness—was evidently a product of the 'trauma' caused when Ilsa suddenly ended their relationship. In the same vein, Rick's aggressive, even sadistic treatment of Yvonne and women in general could be explained in terms of repressed aggressions and a desire for revenge that Rick transfers from Ilsa. Furthermore, his encounters with Ilsa also seem to be charged with these aggressions, desires for revenge, and attempts to compensate the past injury to his self-esteem with power games. At the same time, Rick's encounter with Ilsa confronts him also with his old ego ideal, his past idealism, and tension that is critical to his identity builds between this ego ideal and his present self-perception.

This is intended to provide just a few suggestions of how certain psychoanalytic concepts could be compatible with the previous results. Some other psychoanalytic positions, on the other hand, will correspond to neither most viewer's assumptions nor the filmmakers' intentions. When they are applied, solely the views of critics who are well versed in psychoanalysis are reconstructed, or suggestions are made for an expanded (ideal) understanding of the characters. For example, several aspects of Lacan's approach correspond to neither folk psychology nor empirical knowledge about reception processes. The fact that Rick has an Oedipal relationship to 'mother' Ilsa and 'father/rival' Laszlo is also improbable, as other fields of association are more likely (his relationship with Ilsa may have more in common, if anything, with a father-daughter relationship). And that Rick and Renault develop a homosexual relationship (the latter jokes that he would fall in love with Rick if he were a woman) may be an inventive what-if reading of the film (expanding the field of possible forms of reception), but one that probably only few viewers would actually consider.

6.5 Overview: Focal Points and Connections of Character Traits

The traits of represented beings that are dealt with here are closely interrelated, and they can change in the course of a film and become typical focuses of attention. On the basis of the previous sections on physicality, sociality, and psyche, there are five central aspects of character analysis that are connected. When investigating characters' physicality, the following areas are of prime importance:

- general appearance and accessories (e.g., eyeglasses, hairdos);
- face, facial expressions, and visual behaviour (oculesics);
- posture and motion behaviour (gestures, proxemic, and haptic behaviour);
- verbal and paralinguistic behaviour (manner of speaking); and
- position in an environment's situational contexts.

These body signs, most of which are more or less directly audible or visible, not only have immediate effects on viewers and their psychophysical reactions, such as revulsion or erotic attraction, they also enable conclusions about characters' social and psychological traits: characters intentionally dress and move in a certain way, and by doing so, position themselves socially. Social factors can often be roughly grasped more quickly and simply than psychological ones. The following groups of concepts are helpful in assessing characters in social terms:

- social action, interaction, and relations;
- social systems, groups, and structures;
- social positions, roles, and status;
- social representations, norms, and values; and
- identity.

The last two in particular point out the close relationship between the social and the mental: the sociality of people provides important information about their inner life and shapes their personality; vice versa, social action and social relations have psychological motivations. The psyche is normally the most complex area in character analysis and the one that most requires interpretation. A variety of folk-psychological, historically and culturally specific, or scientific concepts can be used to describe the following areas:

- fleeting inner life and constant personality traits;
- types of mental processes and dispositions: perception, cognition, emotion, and motivation;
- personality dimensions, such as the Big Five: emotional stability, extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness/culture;

- personality functions: abilities, temperament, action and assessment characteristics, identity (self-referential dispositions); and
- psychological causes, unconscious processes, repressions and disorders, e.g., attachments to objects, dispositions, and psychopathologies.

All three levels—physicality, sociality, and psyche—touch upon major and minor forms of behaviour and action, the external behavioural forms on the level of the body, the inner motives on the level of the psyche, and interaction between individuals on the level of sociality. The first impression of characters induces viewers to generate fields of expectations concerning their behaviour. When confronted by a mugger, an eighty-year-old retiree will presumably behave differently than a twenty-five-year-old kickboxer. Overlaps of such fields of expectations that are linked with the depiction of certain traits lead to increasingly specific anticipations of character behaviour (which a surprising twist of plot can then upset). The viewers make hypotheses about the character that point in different temporal directions:

- assumptions about the character's present: motives, goals, character, roles, etc.;
- assumptions about the past (backstory); and
- expectations for the future.

With the aid of such hypotheses and expectations, the character is anchored in the film's narrative context. The wealth and changeability of the character's traits, which could only be suggested here, often result in a level of complexity that must be simplified and evaluated during analysis. Two useful methods of dealing with this are, firstly, searching for particularly central, noteworthy, and powerful traits and, secondly, trying to assign the character to a certain type.

While films can foreground all kinds of characteristics, some are particularly relevant for analysis. Essentially, these are characteristics that are of central importance for human social life because they are linked with strong values, interests, and affects, or deviate from standards of normality:

- physical traits such as sex, attractiveness, illness, deformation, and abilities such as strength, dexterity, etc.;
- psychological traits, especially motivation and emotion, mental abilities, identity, and psychological disorders;
- social traits such as roles, status, and value systems as well as assignment to in-groups or out-groups, e.g., nationalities, religions, ethnic groups, (sub) cultures; and
- in the area of behaviour, above all prosocial and antisocial interaction, 'giving' and 'taking' (crimes, displays of affection, etc.).

Analyses and empirical investigations of large numbers of texts can reveal statistically significant focuses of traits in characters. However, this has merely begun for fiction films. A few general results from the assessment of television series and movies (from the United States for the most part) can possibly be applied to feature films made in Western industrialised countries. For example, it has been shown that most characters are white, middle- or upper-class males between the ages of nineteen and thirty-five (Nitsche 2000; Maurer and Reinemann 2006: 226–28). Economically disadvantaged individuals, women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities are still significantly underrepresented, particularly in protagonist roles. Recent research has shown, for instance, that in 2016 only a third of the protagonists of German TV programs were female (Linke and Prommer 2021). With regard to the spectrum of values, it has been shown that characters increasingly advocate values involving self-realisation, such as individualism and hedonism, while the significance of values involving external obligations, such as discipline and achievement, has declined.

Traits that concern values and are overrepresented in the media are in general particularly significant for the creation of *person types*, which are stored in the memory as mental prototypes and activated when certain traits are depicted (see Chapter 5). Such types comprise a certain combination of physical, psychological, and social traits, whereby various traits can be foregrounded:

- Body types are defined in terms of physical characteristics, most of which are linked to certain personality traits, such as the constitutional types athletic, pyknic, and leptosomatic.
- The wide spectrum of psychological personality types includes—to name just a few central examples—the temperaments of humoral pathology (sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic), personality disorders (paranoid, schizoid, etc.; see Asendorpf 2005: 157–61), Carl Gustav Jung’s archetypes and character types (extraversion/introversion; thinking, feeling, sensation, and intuition) and Freud’s typologies (Oedipal, oral, anal, etc.). On the basis of the possible combinations of the Big Five dimensions alone, an enormous spectrum of types can be constructed.
- Social types are determined by social roles (e.g., professional roles) and group membership. They often consolidate into collective, overgeneralised, rigid, and schematic stereotypes in which value-laden physical, psychological, and social traits are linked to the characteristics of gender and group membership (see Chapters 5, 9–11). Harmful stereotypes of various ethnic groups have been described in film theory, such as for African Americans (‘Uncle Tom’, ‘Mammy’, ‘Coon’, ‘Tragic Mulatto’, and ‘Brutal Buck’; see Bogle 2004), Latinos (‘Greaser’, ‘Bandido’, ‘Latin Lover’, ‘Dark Lady’, ‘Male Buffoon’, and ‘Female Clown’; see Berg 2002) and Arabs (‘villains and terrorists’, ‘sheikhs’, ‘repressed women and harem concubines’, ‘ancient Egyptians’ and ‘Palestinians’; see Shaheen 2001).

The relationships between these typologies, further media types, and individual characters are dealt with in more detail in Part IV. By this point, it should have become clear that the classification of characters as a certain type enables an economical consolidation, as it permits attribution of an entire set of traits. The spectrum of available types is, however, itself so extensive that basing character analysis on a single typology does not suffice at all. Here, too, a decision needs to be made in each individual case while remaining aware of the simplification involved.

6.6 Transformation and Deconstruction of Represented Beings

The physical, psychological, and social traits of characters described in the previous sections form a system with a basic structure that, in most films, corresponds to the mental schema of a (human) person. So far, this trait system of characters has generally been considered from a static perspective. However, the character model and its system of traits are dynamic. They change in the course of a film as new information is provided and they are embedded in contexts that also change (see Parts IV and V). Such changes can be more or less far-reaching. It is not uncommon for characters to change physically, mentally, or socially more or in other ways than real people can, for example by adapting their body shape and habitus incredibly quickly to different situations (Figure 18). In extreme cases, the narrative can even hinder the formation of a coherent, constant character model, thereby deconstructing the represented being.

At least five levels of dynamism can be seen when characters and their traits change. Firstly, characters are involved in external actions and in varying interactions and configurations with other characters and environments. They act and become the objects of others' actions. External events trigger inner changes or vice versa. Secondly, the character goes through various fleeting mental and physical states; has dreams and changing feelings and perceptual experiences; remembers things; is happy or sad, healthy or sick. Thirdly, the normally relatively constant traits of body form, personality, and social situation can change in more or less drastic ways, and a character can gain lasting insights, achieve a new status or moral attitudes, develop physical or mental abilities, or lose everything, position, attractiveness, or mind. A character can, fourthly, change in terms of artefact qualities (see Chapter 8), for example by gradually or suddenly developing inner contradictions or incoherencies, seeming more or less stylised, gaining or losing depth or nuances. Characters can even switch semiotic levels, from a drawn cartoon to filmed live-action or claymation. Fifthly, the viewer's imaginative, affective relationship with the character can change (see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14), which can happen even if the character stays the same (for example, a character can be seen from different perspectives or in different shot sizes).

A character's changes can be surprising or foreseeable. A character changing into a werewolf is one example of a transformation that is normally expected due to previous knowledge, though the time and manner of the transformation are not. On the basis

of previous knowledge, genre, paratexts, and characterisation, the character is already situated within a context of suspected changes in the past and expected changes in the future. Certain things are expected of characters on the basis of their motives and traits, and there are also anticipations of future actions, conflicts (characters that do not get along and who have conflicting objectives will clash), affects (something will end in tragedy), and results (the matching couple will eventually get together).



Fig. 18 The titular character in Woody Allen's *Zelig* constantly transforms to fit his environment and profoundly changes his physical, psychological, and social characteristics; here he suddenly becomes corpulent. (Dir. Woody Allen, *Zelig*, 1983, Orion Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.)

When analysing represented beings, changes in physical, psychological, and social traits that are normally relatively stable are particularly important, as was shown by the example of Rick Blaine's transformation. Such changes, often referred to as 'character arcs', have a number of advantages in storytelling (see Chapter 9). They captivate the viewer's attention, provide variety, stimulate enduring interest, increase the impression of realism, facilitate intensification of emotions, and go into the theme in greater depth—all of which are reasons to use changes in mainstream narrative film. Almost all screenwriting manuals claim that the main characters, the protagonist at least, must develop or 'grow' in some way.³⁴ Since such guides can be regarded as normative poetics of mainstream cinema that influence film production and reflect widespread conventions of storytelling, it is no wonder that most mainstream films satisfy this demand.

According to such normative positions, the protagonist's development should be a continuous, gradual process that lasts for the entire film and can be described as a

34 E.g., Frensham 1996: 81ff.; Phillips and Huntley 1999; Egri 1960.

transformational arc or throughline.³⁵ This development takes place in phases as the character deals with the obstacles in its path to the ultimate goal. The plot points in the external action mark the stages of the inner action; for example, the hero (mostly imagined as male in the manuals) has failed for now, meaning that he must consider a different strategy, and as a result, he learns something and develops. Or the hero was partially successful in achieving an external goal, which helps him internally.

Development of the action and of the protagonist's personality are closely linked in mainstream film.³⁶ The external story takes the form of a problem-solving process during which obstacles on the way to a concrete goal must be overcome through action. On the inside, personality development or a learning process plays out, during which the hero makes moral decisions, acquires abilities and knowledge, eliminates errors and weaknesses, heals inner wounds, and overcomes trauma. The hero's transformation is conveyed through action, which should, according to the conventions of dramatic structure in 'classical' mainstream film, make the change in personality visible from outside.³⁷

Restorative three-act stories [this refers to the self-contained three-act structure in mainstream film] are character-driven. They are not about action alone, nor are they about characters incidentally caught up in events. Rather, three-act stories are about the intersection of a particular action and a particular character so that the working out of the action is a simultaneous working out of the character. (Dancyger and Rush 1991: 19)

Wall Street provides an example of an inner development brought about by moral decisions. The character development of the protagonist, Bud, coincides with the external action (see Dancyger and Rush 1991: 20). Bud is torn between respect for his father and his values, and the desire to escape his father's constrictive world, be successful, and prove himself. At the conclusion of the first act, the unscrupulous manager Gordon Gekko induces him to break the law, and Bud allows himself to be corrupted morally in the interest of success. At the turning point in the second act, Gekko tries to take over and destroy the airline where Bud's father has worked all his life. Bud starts to turn against Gekko but is thoroughly at a loss at first. At the end of the third act, he is morally rehabilitated, has regained his footing, and has also obtained a secure job by helping save the airline from Gekko.

The commonly used term 'character growth' reflects the fact that a protagonist's development is typically positive; mainstream film tends to resemble a *Bildungsroman*. The protagonist is supposed to have learned or gained something by the ending of films in most genres. Christopher Vogler refers to examples for positive changes at the end of the 'hero's journey' such as being initiated into a new status, new realisations

35 Frensham speaks of a transformational arc (1996: 81–82); Phillips and Huntley 1999 identify four different throughlines, one for the main character and three others for the impact character that influences it.

36 This is also described in film theory. See, for example, Arnes 1994: 66ff., Chapter 9.

37 This convention has become looser in postclassical cinema.

and abilities, seeing through a deception, self-actualisation, and recognition of another character's personal development. The screenwriting manuals also mention changes for the worse. As possible negative changes, Vogler lists overestimation of oneself, repression, being infected by an opponent's malignancy, and the emergence of moral flaws (Vogler 1992: 208–12).³⁸

Fiction features normally show only a limited and particularly interesting section of their protagonist's physical, psychological, and social development, which is located within a larger span of past and future developments. Many characters have a past, history, or backstory that partially explains their present traits, and viewers expect characters to develop in certain ways in the future. The backstory plays a decisive role for viewers sympathising with Rick Blaine. We can explain and excuse Rick's initial egotism and bitterness by looking at his past. He was an idealistic freedom fighter and a happy man until Ilsa disappointed his great love. At the same time, this suggests that he has a lot of potential for improvement. At the film's end, it turns out that this expectation was justified. Rick leaves for Brazzaville to join the anti-Nazi resistance.

Such more or less steady transformations in a character's personality represent a typical and especially important form of change, but by no means the only one. Many characters undergo sudden changes that cross the borders of everyday experience to enter into the realm of the fantastic and are connected to deep-seated desires and fears. Such far-reaching changes, sometimes even physical metamorphoses, can often be directly linked to a change in personality. For example, the aging, mild-mannered publisher Will Randall (Jack Nicholson) in *Wolf* not only becomes a werewolf physically, his human personality also takes on wolfish qualities of power and sensuousness. He defeats a cruel younger rival and couples with a female wolf. In this case, the transformation of body and personality takes place effortlessly, not as a result of a decision made by the character but from an external effect, thereby catering to male fantasies of potency and desires for power. On the other hand, existential anxieties about powerlessness are addressed in *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. A man gets smaller and smaller, his wife becoming a relative giant and his house and basement turning into an endless landscape full of dangers, until he finally becomes one with the universe. In this case, the character's physical traits change in relation to his environment in a very fundamental and ominous manner. At the same time, the character has to learn to deal with his helplessness, fear, despair, and anger while overcoming the newly arising problems, thus undergoing a change in personality and a continuous process of trying to cope.

Such plots involving a metamorphosis are common in the fantasy, sci-fi, and horror genres, and there are a number of variants. In one of them, the transformation begins early in the film, as in the two examples described above, and is the result of some external influence; it is then completed by the film's ending. The change begins

38 In the screenwriting program *Dramatica*, the character can either gain or lose something, and the thing lost or gained can be either positive or negative (Phillips and Huntley 1999).

suddenly and then continues inexorably. With physical metamorphoses, a frog or beast can turn into a prince; the scientist can become a fly, the 'ugly duckling' a proud swan; a human can turn into an angel, vampire, werewolf, or zombie. The protagonist may come to terms with the change and then stop it, reverse it, or transform it into something positive. Or the transformation ends tragically, as with the scientist Dr Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) in *The Fly* (Figure 19). A more realistic variant of that can also be found in war films such as *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Johnny Got His Gun*, in which the characters are thoroughly changed not as a result of fantastic causes or their own fault, but by the brutality of war.



Fig. 19 The transformation of the protagonist into the horrible hybrid Brundlefly in *The Fly*. (Dir. David Cronenberg, *The Fly*, 1986, Brookfilms/SLM, USA. All rights reserved.)

In a second variant, the protagonist's goal is to escape a threatening metamorphosis, the horrible nature of which is demonstrated by its effect on other, secondary characters, such as destruction, madness, or a miserable state of vegetating. *The Stepford Wives* expresses uncanny experiences with female gender roles through a story where all women of a small town are replaced by their husbands with soulless, submissive doppelgangers. Further examples are vampire, zombie, and 'body snatcher' films, David Cronenberg's *Shivers*, etc. Such plots often work out fears of physical or psychological processes involving sickness, infection, decay, disfiguration, dementia, deformation of the personality, or loss of identity. Such fears can be used not only to create tension throughout a film, but also in individual *shock transformations*, that—like in Tod Browning's *Freaks*—often portray in a shocking revelation parable-like before and after images as a consequence of a character's behaviour. *Freaks* is about a beautiful trapeze artist who marries a little person for his money, then cheats on him and tries to poison him. His friends, who also perform as circus freaks, wreak

vengeance by horribly disfiguring the woman, thereby making her one of them. Many independent and auteur films thematise change and disintegration of identity, in a way much different from the mainstream examples described above. In Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, the faces of a mute actress and her nurse are superimposed to form a single countenance.

Gradual character development, metamorphosis that begins suddenly and progresses continuously, and marked shock transformation are various *rhythms* of transformation that influence the rhythm at which the plot develops. Physical and psychological transformation, change in external relationships and social roles, relationships with other characters, and with regard to position within the film's value system are various *types* of transformation that are closely related to the film's theme and the manner of its affective address. External influences, the character's inner decisions, magic, and inexplicable, contingent, or absurd effects are *factors* of transformation that refer to worldviews and concepts of the human.

It is even more irritating when viewers are completely deprived of understanding the characters, which may be deconstructed by the film itself. This happens when films provide insufficient, contradictory, or unreliable information about them, making it impossible for viewers to develop a consistent character model, or when the film's information conflicts with basic mental dispositions such as the person schema. The unreliable narrative instance in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad/Last Year at Marienbad* provides contradictory information about the characters. We never learn whether they exist in reality or merely in imagination and memory, to say nothing of what—if anything—happened between them in Marienbad (or elsewhere) the year before. For *Cet obscur objet du désir/That Obscure Object of Desire*, Luis Buñuel cast a leading role with two actresses who look quite differently.³⁹ In Jean-Luc Godard's *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle/Two or Three Things I Know about Her*, an authorial voice-over introduces and describes the actress and then, in a mirror image, does the same for her character. In *Fight Club*, one of the main characters turns out to be the protagonist's hallucinated alter-ego. In Bergman's *Persona*, the identities of two women become increasingly interlocked until they dissolve into one another, portrayed in the famous blending of their faces. Such relatively experimental film forms contain a number of depictions of a disintegrating identity in which visual symbols are used extensively. At the end of Ottmar Domnick's *Jonas*, the protagonist's face is multiplied in mirrors and by means of superimpositions. The voice-over asks, 'Which of us am I?'

Personal identity and the issue of body and soul are also frequently thematised in mainstream films. In *The Thing*, an alien virus infects a number of terrestrial beings, such as dogs and humans, and combines their genetic material to create new and terrifying bodies. In other films, humans exchange their faces (*Face/Off*), are possessed by aliens or demons (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Exorcist*, *Alien*), are revealed to be

39 See Smith 1995; Michaels 1998; Wulff 1997.

soulless automatons (*The Terminator*, zombie movies), or are ‘colonised’ by the minds of others (*Just the Two of Us/The Dark Side of Tomorrow* [cf. Wulff 1997]). Films involving a ‘body swap’, such as *Farligt venskab/Body Switch* or *Switch*, decouple a person’s body and psyche. One character’s consciousness is suddenly in another’s body, e.g., a macho man’s soul is transferred to a woman’s body; someone’s body speaks and acts in a manner previously depicted as characteristic of a different person.

The disintegration of a character’s identity fascinates audiences because it causes cognitive disruption of perception and addresses elementary fears and wishes. Clowns and the possessed, robots and zombies, aliens and monsters demonstrate human traits while deviating from the human schema in central areas, such as consciousness, empathy, feelings, morals, free will, and intentionality. Empty, staring eyes; flat, expressionless voices; jerky movements, mechanical or exaggerated speech and actions; reflexive, instinctive behaviour; and automation of bodily functions are signals for such weird or comic deviations (Grodal 1999: 106ff.). Shudders elicited by monsters in horror films and laughter at comic characters result in part from the way these kinds of films create a sort of dizziness of categorisation because they satisfy some essential elements of the person schema but not others.

Such deviations from normality demonstrate the fundamental importance of grasping represented beings in character analysis and experiencing films in general. The following chapters about motivation and constellation (Chapters 9 and 10), closeness and affective involvement (Chapters 13 and 14) will look at this in more detail. However, when the malleability and fragility of characters becomes obvious through their transformations, often their status as artificial creations and fabrications will also become conspicuous. The next chapters will look at this status more closely—after all, characters are not only represented beings, they are also artefacts.

6.7 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions about Characters as Represented Beings

1. In view of the goal of the analysis and the viewers’ dispositions, which folk or scientific concepts are most suitable to describe the character’s physicality, psyche, sociality, and behaviour and to substantiate statements made about it?
2. What kind of being is the character? Is it human or non-human? Is it natural (plant, animal), supernatural (god, demon), extraterrestrial (alien), or artificial (robot, computer)? Or is it a hybrid of some of these categories (cyborg, monster)? If a non-human being is involved, which of its traits and abilities differ from those possessed by humans, and which are the same?
3. In general, how is the character’s system of traits structured? What are its most important features, and how are they related?

- How complex, complete, and consistent is the character's system of traits? Is it possible to construct a coherent character model, or are there gaps, ruptures, or contradictions?
 - Which of the character's traits are most important? Is the character presented primarily physically (as in pornographic, action, and horror films), psychologically (as in psychological dramas), or socially (as in political films)? Are certain personality traits, mental experiences, or forms of behaviour foregrounded in the media text?
 - Are certain traits of the character associated with powerful collective affects, values, norms, or taboos? Are such crucial traits emphasised or omitted? What makes the character stand out in terms of such traits, such as physical attractiveness, vulnerability, and bodily functions; motivation, emotion, identity, and mental disorders; social role, status, and value systems, classification in in-groups and out-groups; or prosocial and antisocial action?
 - Is the character individualised or typified? Which common types in the media or in society does it correspond to, for instance, concerning body types, personality types, or social (stereo-)types?
 - What role does the character's past and future play (in relation to the present)? What do we learn or not learn about that?
4. How can the character's corporeality and external behaviour be described?
- Can concepts from research on nonverbal communication or other human sciences be applied to describe the character's body and external appearance?
 - How does the viewers' image of the character's body develop? Is the body fully presented at the beginning, kept concealed, or suddenly revealed? Which physical aspects are emphasised or marginalised?
 - How is the character portrayed in regard to the following: general external appearance and accessories (e.g., glasses, hairdos); facial expressions, visual behaviour; posture and movements (gestures, kinetic, proxemic and haptic behaviour); verbal and paralinguistic behaviour (manner of speaking); and position in an environment's situational contexts?
 - How does the character's corporeality correspond to collective norms and values? To what extent is the character's depiction related to value-laden aspects such as beauty, sexuality, health, fitness, (dis-)ability, or age?
 - To what extent do the body and external behaviour reflect the character's psyche and sociality? Does the character's appearance suggest physiognomic or folk-sociological judgements? What do clothing and

hairdo reveal about sociality and personality? Does the character's clothing influence its movement and body image (constriction, directing attention, etc.)?

- What kind of spatial environment does the character inhabit? Did they design or shape this environment? Does the environment influence the character in terms of personality or affect; does it express personality traits or function as an atmospheric mood space? How does the environment structure relationships and interactions; does it block some or require others? Is the environment a metaphor for the character?
- Are there any objects the character is closely bound to? Do they provide a basis for conclusions about preferences and abilities, or do they function as symbols?

5. Does the character exhibit conspicuous or repeated forms of bodily behaviour? What do important actions say about the character's personality? Is behaviour predictable or not in comparison to what one would expect from people in the real world?

- Which rhythms, chords, and tempo do the character's movements and facial expressions exhibit? What about posture, walking, standing, and sitting? Are there typical patterns of movement and expressions, quirks, etc.? Which personality traits does all that suggest?
- How does the character talk (content, style, paralinguistic features)? How can the manner of speaking, vocal qualities, vocalisations, intonation, rhythms and dynamics of its dialogues be described? Does the character speak in a loud or quiet voice? Are they polite or coarse, honest or dishonest? Do they speak with an accent, dialect, speech impediment, or vocal peculiarity? Are certain figures of speech used with particular frequency? Does the character have any preferred themes? What do they say about themselves and others? Is there a subtext?

6. How can the character's sociality be described (see also Chapter 10)?

- What characterises the character in terms of the following: social interactions and relationships; social systems, groups, and structures; social positions, roles, and status; social representations, values, and norms; and social identity?
- Which social groups and roles is the character classified in, which is it excluded from or positioned against? Does it correspond to widespread social prototypes, stereotypes, or archetypes?
- What are the character's most important social relationships and how do they develop? How can its relationships with other characters be described in terms of love, power, and recognition?

- What is the character's social behaviour like? Does it coincide with or contradict social values and norms; is it prosocial or antisocial? How can the character's attitude toward society be described—affirmative or dismissive? Is the character a hero, rebel, or sociopath?
7. How can the character's psyche—the inner life and personality—be described (see also Chapter 9)?
- Can the psyche be better grasped with the aid of folk-psychological, historically and culturally specific (e.g., mythical, religious), or contemporary scientific concepts? Does the character conform to psychological (personality) types?
 - What are the means and strategies used to portray the character's psyche? What characterises the character's transitory inner life and constant personality traits? Are certain media or genre-typical aspects of the psyche foregrounded, e.g., suffering in a melodrama?
 - What do we learn about the character's inner life? How deeply do we explore their psychological processes? Which stable personality traits and which short-term mental processes of perception, cognition, emotion, and motivation/evaluation are emphasised or marginalised? How does the character's inner life develop? Are perceptions, dreams, and mental representations visually depicted?
 - Do the various characters exhibit different ways of thinking and feeling? Which mental processes do not appear?
 - Do concepts of cognitive sciences help describe the character's psyche more precisely? How does the character solve problems and grasp, process, and store information? Does it show certain mental patterns or disturbances, such as in the areas of perception, thought, or memory?
 - What are the character's crucial personality traits? Can empirical psychological models, such as the Big Five or the 16 PFI, be used as a heuristic? How neurotic, extroverted, amiable, conscientious, or open-minded is the character?
 - Which mental abilities and attitudes relating to the self and to others does the character have? What kind of temperament and basic motivation; what normative or hedonistic motives can be perceived?
 - To what extent do the character's inner life and personality correspond to or conflict with values and norms? Does the character have psychopathological traits?
 - Do psychoanalytical theories enable a more precise description of the character? Does it correspond to a psychoanalytic character type, such as anal, oral, Oedipal, or narcissistic; Jung's archetypes; or certain types of object attachment?

8. How does the character model change during reception and what consequences does that have?

- Does the character undergo significant changes in the course of the story? If so, which ones? How do the character's body, psyche, and sociality change? Are the changes gradual or sudden, singular or frequent? When do they take place? Are they evaluated as positive or negative? Are they connected to collective fears or wishes?
- Which hypotheses about the character's past and future do the recipients construct? What do they learn about the character's backstory? Which expectations about the future does the film suggest, and what potentials and possible developments does the character show?
- In what way does the viewers' momentary character model develop, and what developments do we see retrospectively compared to our final character model (e.g., concerning the character's true nature as opposed to their appearance)?

PART IV: CHARACTERS AS ARTEFACTS

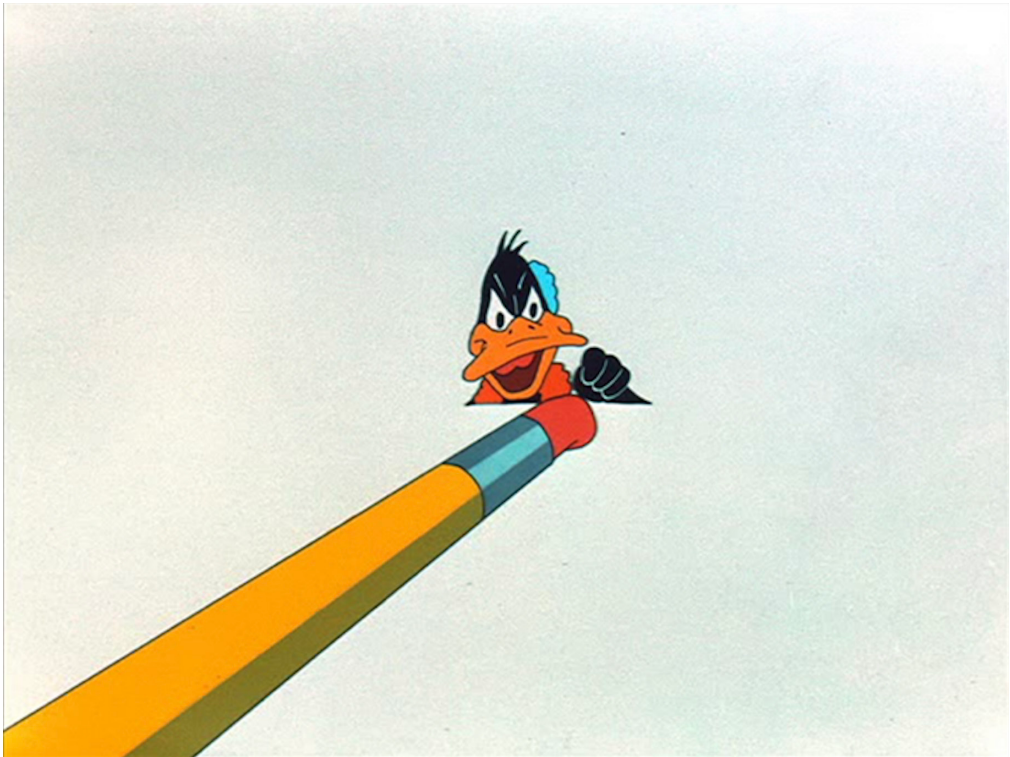


Fig. 20 Daffy Duck being erased by the animator in *Duck Amuck*: a case of narrative metalepsis, pointing to the textual construction of characters. (Dir. Charles M. Jones, *Duck Amuck*, 1953, Warner Bros. Cartoons, USA. All rights reserved.)

Part IV

The initial chapters in this book have shown that characters can be analysed in four different respects: as beings in the represented world, as symbols with indirect meanings, as symptoms with sociocultural causes and effects, and as artefacts shaped in a specific way. The model of the 'Character Clock' indicates that these aspects of the character are closely linked in reception but can still be analysed separately. Part III focused on the character as a represented (often fictional) being. When viewers grasp represented beings and their traits by constructing character models, both social

perception and knowledge about media and specific texts play a role. When analysing the corporeality, psyche, sociality, and behaviour of represented beings, we can draw on intuitive folk 'theories', but also on further concepts and ideas from different disciplines, times, and cultures, depending on the aim of analysis.

This part of the book will focus on the character as an artefact. Thus, the focus shifts from the represented world and its reception to the audiovisual text and its production. The most important aspect of this is understanding more precisely how media devices and narrative techniques enable and influence our apparently simple experience of characters. Focusing on the medium of film, the basic question is: how are characters depicted and shaped in film, and how can their filmic design and textual form be analysed? These questions concern at least three levels of shaping characters (see Diagram 14): the concrete audiovisual devices and techniques, the more abstract narrative or rhetorical structures in which character-related information is conveyed in the course of the film, and very general qualities and conventional conceptions of characters as artefacts created in different genres and kinds of media practice.

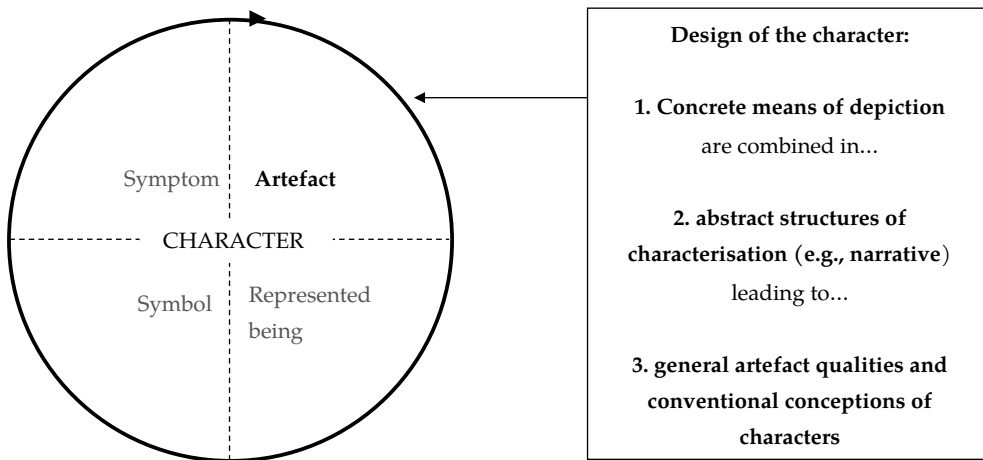


Diagram 14 Different aspects of the character as an artefact: aesthetic means, structures, qualities, and conventions

Concrete means of (re)presentation: the concrete audiovisual means used to create and shape characters can be found in two interrelated areas. The first area encompasses the means and techniques of cinematic production and representation, from casting and acting to camera work and sound design to editing and visual effects. In the second area, that of what is represented, these techniques create an audible and visible storyworld in which characters move in temporal rhythms within spatial compositions. In contrast to the immersive perspective described in Chapter 6, the structures of this represented world can also be analysed from an external perspective as textual means of purposefully shaping represented beings. In particular, a character's inner life, personality and social position are largely derived from what is directly presented and

perceivable in this world—appearance and behaviour, name and speech, environment and objects, situational contexts, narrator's comments, or audiovisual externalisations of a characters' 'inner world'.

Structures of character-related information: beyond the concrete means of audiovisual representation, more abstract structures of characterisation can be identified. Models from narrative theory (e.g., Jannidis 2004) describe how information about characters is provided in the course of the film within certain strategies of characterisation. Character-related information has a certain density, mode, duration, scope, perspective, level, and sequence; for instance, characters may be presented in a concentrated portrait at the beginning or in a gradual development in the course of the film. Furthermore, characterisation can be divided into certain phases such as exposition, deepening, transformation, and final consolidation of a character. In this way, patterns of representation and dynamic developments of characters over time can be captured and compared, and it can be explained how films guide their audience on the four dimensions of the Character Clock.

General artefact qualities and forms of characters: another step of abstraction leads to general properties of the character as an artefact. On this level, a character may be described as altogether being 'realistic', 'complex', 'coherent', 'typified', 'multidimensional', etc. On the basis of the preceding chapter, these notoriously imprecise terms can be made clearer by referring to the structures of trait systems in the character model: they indicate how the traits relate to one another and correspond to conceptions of reality or conventions of filmmaking. Seen in combination, the various qualities of the character as artefact combine into overarching aesthetic types or forms of shaping characters in mainstream, arthouse, postmodern, or experimental films, corresponding to their respective modes and conventions.

These levels of shaping characters as artefacts are media-specific to different degrees. On the first level of concrete means of design, there are the greatest differences between the media: in film, a multimodal flow of moving images and sounds is shaped through specific production techniques such as acting, camera, and montage; in literature, written language is used; in comics, an arrangement of static drawings. This results in very different forms of sensual experience and imagining of characters. In contrast, despite all the differences, many basic structures of information and narration can be found across different media (Thon 2016), and thus also character-related forms of perspectivisation or of creating suspense, curiosity, and surprise. Certain criteria for general artefact properties of the character such as realism, typification, or consistency also extend beyond the medium of film.

While the following focuses on live-action feature films, many findings can thus be transferred to characters in other media. Cinematic means and techniques, structures of characterisation, artefact qualities and aesthetic forms of characters will be discussed in this order—from the concrete to the general. The textual means and structures of the character as artefact play a dual role in the reception process. Firstly, they form the preconscious basis

of our sensory and perceptual experience of characters and evoke spontaneous affective responses. Secondly, they can become the object of conscious reflection, their function can be grasped, they can be aesthetically appreciated, or be used to draw conclusions about the character's features as represented being, symbol, or symptom.



Fig. 21 In Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*, special camera and lighting techniques are combined with colour grading to reveal rich nuances in facial expressions. (Dir. Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight*, 2016, A24/Plan B Entertainment/Pastel Productions, USA. All rights reserved.)

When analysing characters, it is often important to examine specific relationships between their four dimensions. This is especially true for the aesthetic qualities of the character as an artefact. For example, Richard Dyer critically investigated the convention of 'lighting for whiteness' in Hollywood cinema and its racist consequences (Dyer 1997). For a long time, lighting in Hollywood films was optimised for white skin, so that Black characters and their facial expressions were visually obscured and erased. In contrast, Barry Jenkins' Oscar-winning drama *Moonlight* (2016) introduces fascinating and inventive strategies to counter this kind of aesthetic discrimination. The filmmakers used a special camera, lighting, and colour grading that were suitable for darker skin tones (O'Falt 2016; see Figure 21). This has arguably shaped viewers' responses to the Black characters in the film, particularly Chirón, the homosexual protagonist, by making their facial expressions visible and palpable in all their subtle nuances. This design of the characters as artefacts affects not only their understanding as represented beings (especially their emotions and motives), but also the viewers' affective responses and their comprehension of higher-level meanings and themes (such as the immense pressure on people who are Black, male, poor, and gay). On the symptomatic level, it points to the filmmakers' anti-racist consciousness and makes viewers more likely to reflect on social discrimination (and perhaps their own stereotypes). *Moonlight* thus suggests an analytical approach that explores specific connections between the character as artefact, fictional being, symbol, and symptom. The following chapters focus on artefact structures, but their functions, effects, and connections with other dimensions of the character should be kept in mind.

7. Shaping Characters with Cinematic Means: Sensuality and Structure

7.1 Cinematic Techniques and the Aesthetics of Characters

As a temporal flow of moving images and sounds, film is less a medium of abstract linguistic description and narration as one of showing concretely and in vivid, seemingly immediate presence. Film characters are presented in sound and image and embedded in an audiovisual flow; an environment of moving bodies and spatial atmospheres, of increasing and decreasing distances, visual and acoustic changes and rhythms. This gives them a media-specific sensual quality in the viewer's perceptual experience that can be described in three different ways:

- Firstly, in the form of (*folk*) *phenomenological descriptions* of viewers' subjective experiences, such as 'We come closer to the character's face until we almost touch it'.
- Second, in the form of a *formal aesthetic analysis* of the images and sounds that underlie the subjective experience. When we say, 'The outline of the character's face grows larger and larger until it fills the entire left side of the picture', this evokes the experience by specifying formal qualities of the audiovisual signs that trigger it.
- Thirdly, in the form of a *reconstruction of the devices and techniques of production* employed to create the sounds and images as well as the viewers' experiences. When we say, 'The camera moves close to the character's face', we suggest the experience of approaching something, explaining at the same time how it is created.

These three modes of description must often be combined to understand how we perceive and experience film characters. In the following, I will put together some key categories that can be helpful for analysing this aspect. Phenomenological description, while more precise and reflective, is very similar to intuitive forms of talking about films. Therefore, I will focus here on the other two forms of description and analysis. First, I will deal with the film's devices and techniques and then proceed to the results

they produce, the formal characteristics of the sound and flow of images. A brief theoretical consideration of how audiovisual information is conveyed will be useful as an introduction.¹

Character-Related Information and Cinematic Devices

Myriad factors interact in the audiovisual representation of characters. In the characterisation of the eponymous character of *Citizen Kane*, for example, these include the pretentious name Charles Foster Kane, which has associations with 'cane' in the sense of a walking aid and 'to thrash'; the imposing figure, physiognomy, and voice of the actor, Orson Welles; his star image; foreknowledge about the publisher Hearst as a model; the statements made in the film-within-a-film documentary and by people who knew Kane; the self-characterisation by Kane's infectious, egocentric, and boastful manner of speaking; the contrast to his former friend Leland; his laugh and facial expressions, which are later characterised by rage and stiffness; the contradictory nature of his efforts to gain power, recognition, and love; the change in his appearance and behaviour (from casual to formal dress, from youthful to elderly); the deep-focus shots revealing information about his relationships with other characters; the failure of these relationships; the montage sequence showing the alienation in Kane's marriage; his past history as a child sent away by his parents; the expressive rooms of the enormous castle of Xanadu; and the symbolism of the shattering snow dome at his death and the burning sled, Rosebud.

How can the connections between such a wide variety of factors be examined? A good way to begin would be explaining their common function. Character reception is triggered and guided by the film: an image can depict the character's appearance; dialogue can show his or her feelings; and an action can reveal motives. Various generic terms are employed to refer to these means of character representation, particularly 'information', 'textual signs', and 'cues'.² In order to take advantage of the broadest spectrum of research possible, understanding these terms in a similar sense is recommended, namely as text-based stimuli that trigger character-related mental processes in the viewers' minds. What is considered

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- 1 The focus of this chapter on the formal aesthetic and production analysis of characters as artefacts does not mean that my approach is incompatible with thick phenomenological descriptions or that I consider them less important. On the contrary, I consider them indispensable and it often makes perfect sense to concentrate on them. The example above is intended precisely to indicate how different forms of description can be related to each other. For example, formal aesthetic and production categories can be used to ground subjective descriptions of how a character is experienced on a more objective basis. However, a more detailed theoretical examination of the different understandings of the three modes of description in various theories of film and media aesthetics (such as neophenomenology, postmodernism, or Deleuzian positions) would go too far here.
 - 2 In terms of semiotics, this represents a double level of signs: iconic signs (sounds, images, make-up, etc.) denote other, primary signs of an iconic, indexical, or symbolic nature (see Fischer-Lichte 1983a: 28; Peirce 1993: 64–67). In the field of literary studies, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan speaks of 'indicators' (1996: 59), while David Bordwell (1985: 1992) mentions 'cues' in film theory, and Manfred Pfister (1988) the 'provision of information', while Joe Anderson (1996: 29) employs a different concept of such information. This brings up the question of what can be considered information (signs, etc.) and which information is relevant, but for most films, there is a relatively large consensus about that.

‘information’, ‘signs’, etc. is defined in reference to the (intended) reception—in that we react (or are expected to react) with certain mental processes. In film it is possible to use signs intentionally that in reality would be unintended: an actor who sneezes during a film intentionally represents someone who unintentionally signals a cold by sneezing (Esslin 1989: 46). However, films also contain unintentional signs, such as wristwatches in peplum films, and deciding what is intentional is not always possible.

Thus, character representation in film means conveying audiovisual information—various stimuli that dynamically guide reception and are functionally directed at the viewers’ perceptual, cognitive, and affective responses (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 5).³ The film’s information, like our processing operations, has a variety of levels. The starting point is the information materially given on the screen and in the air. We perceive its waves of light and sound as a series of moving images, spoken and written language, sounds and music. And this audiovisual flow in turn conveys impressions of living beings’ external features, on the basis of which we draw conclusions about what goes on inside them. Complex movement patterns of shapes, objects, camera and editing can function as bodily felt metaphors and suggest complex meanings, for example with regard to the motivation of protagonists (Coëgnarts and Slugan 2022). *Characterisation* should therefore be understood as a dynamic multilevel process whereby information is conveyed that leads to the construction of a mental character model and attribution of physical, mental, and social traits to the character. In addition, information given by the film guides our later reactions to characters, for instance affective involvement or understanding them as symbols. Thus, every film can be analysed by asking which bits of information are used for character representation and in what way. In doing so, it is important to see that character-related information is located on at least two levels, that of what is represented and that of the representation itself.⁴

On the level of what is represented, the character’s externally perceptible characteristics indicate traits that cannot be perceived directly. Some traits can be registered in a relatively direct way: figure and face, external movements, facial expressions, body language, voice, utterances, manner of speaking, and location in an environment.⁵ This also applies to names, visualised mental processes, and statements made by other characters and narrators. These audible and visible signs permit conclusions about imperceptible traits: sociality (relationships, group memberships, roles), psyche (fleeting inner life, personality), and indiscernible physical states (e.g., illnesses or past appearance). Put more simply, we draw conclusions concerning the interior on the basis of the exterior,

3 Edward Branigan defines narration as the regulation and distribution of knowledge (1992: 76). Pfister (1988: 67–148) investigates the ‘provision of information’ in drama. How this happens at films’ beginnings is described in detail by Britta Hartmann (1995: 2001).

4 From the perspective of narratology, the level of what is represented is part of the *story* or *histoire*, and the level of the representation is an aspect of the *discourse* or *style*.

5 Margolin speaks of ‘mimetic elements’ that underlie inference of the personality (1986: 205ff.). Pfister and Rimmon-Kenan categorise the mimetic elements in schemata that are then linked with dimensions of the distribution and structuring of information (Pfister 1988: 250–64; Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 59–70). Due to the difficulties that arise relating to the differences between film, theatre, and literature, etc., I have dispensed with this link.

concerning the abstract on the basis of the concrete, concerning inner life and personality on the basis of behaviour, and concerning the past and future on the basis of the present. In this section, the perceptible properties of represented beings will be looked at from a functional perspective, that is, how they serve as means of representation to portray the character also in their not directly perceptible properties. For example, early in *Casablanca* Rick is playing chess by himself, which reveals him to be an introverted strategist.

However, a character's external traits are themselves conveyed through a film's sounds and images, which shape and support the suggestive function of these traits. Thus, the second level must be considered: *the level of representation*. The specific manner in which the film's sounds and images are structured with the aid of stylistic devices contributes significantly to character reception, guides inferences about the character, and provides concrete sensory impressions. When Rick is first introduced, the camera shows a close-up of his hand, then pans to his face. This directs the viewer's attention to the details of gestures and facial expressions and suggests conclusions about Rick's personality.

The following sections will deal with this second level of characterisation, the means it employs, its structures and effects. They can be described most easily from the perspective of production. The construction of character-related signs is usually a collaborative effort in which four major creative contributions can be distinguished: writing, acting, directing/filming, and editing.

In the screenplay, the characters are set up and their basic characteristics are suggested briefly. Screenplays are anticipations of films and characters that do not yet exist. Usually, decisions regarding whether a film will be produced and which actors are suitable for it are made on the basis of the screenplay, and later, it serves as something for the film crew to go by. Screenwriters formulate dialogues, select situations, suggest perspectives, position individual characters within a constellation, and work out the plot's structure. They try to anticipate the character on paper, and necessarily fail because later others—actors, directors, make-up artists, and cinematographers—take the words on the pages and turn them into images, sounds, and actions, making what the script suggest concrete, but also altering it.

The actor embodies the character, giving them physical presence. During the performance, their body becomes that of the character, which takes on a number of its features: physiognomy, movements, gestures, facial expression, a certain way of looking, a pleasant or unpleasant appearance, attractiveness, presence, charisma, and sometimes even star images. The character's 'incarnation' is shaped through the actor's art and altered by their movements and appearance. Through their performance and acting style, the character's personality traits are concretised and given greater detail.

Decoupage, mise-en-scene, and shooting, on the other hand, involve a kind of disembodiment: the actor's physical presence in front of the camera is transformed into signs, sounds, and images. A wide variety of cinematic devices are employed for this purpose, and they influence the character. How the camera records the actor and the director stages interaction, how the body is reshaped by costuming and make-up, the set design's spatial context and the effects of lighting, the use of body doubles—all these factors influence our

impressions of the physicality, psyche, sociality, and behaviour of the characters in a film.

During post-production, the filmed sounds and images that depict characters are edited and processed. The editing determines the selection, length, and sequence of the shots in which the character is visible and their pace, how and when they speed up and slow down. Dialogues are dubbed, sounds and voices are mixed according to the sound design, and music is added, sometimes as a leitmotif. Computer specialists work on the images' fine points, suppressing undesirable details of characters' appearance or creating special effects, such as changing shapes by morphing.

The screenplay, acting, direction, and post-production are all parts of a film's *character-related style and rhetoric* and work together to construct the characters and shape their effects. Each of these four creative areas is subject to practical constraints and follows, or varies, conventions. Each of them can be considered and judged separately ('The actress attempted to do the best she could with a bad part, but she never had a chance because of the incompetent direction'). And each of them employs certain techniques and strategies of representation. All the film's sign systems can contribute on the level of representation to characterising the character and guiding character-related viewer reactions, most importantly:⁶

- paratexts and prior information: title, genre, names of the characters, prologue, opening credits, epilogue, trailer, etc.;
- actors and how they are staged: casting and star images, personality, body, voice, movement, acting style, manner of speaking, performance, make-up, hair, wardrobe, staging of their interaction;
- production design: choice of location, set design, props, colours, lighting;
- camerawork and animation: framing, angle and setup, choice of lens, use of filters, movement (tracking shots, pans, Steadicam, handheld camera), lighting, frame rate and projection speed (time-lapse and slow-motion effects), sometimes also drawing style or type of digital animation;
- music and sound design: composition, use of a leitmotif for characterisation or conveying a mood, dialogue styles, non-musical sound, dubbing; and
- editing and post-production: combination of shots (hard cut, fade or dissolve, split screen, etc.), strategy for combining and alternating shots (continuity editing or montage of attractions, jump cuts and match cuts, etc.), rhythm of the flow of images, text inserts, digital VFX (morphing, colour grading and effects, retouching), relations between sound, music, and images.

6 The fields of theatre, film, and television studies contain comprehensive concepts for analysing sign systems. This list was augmented and modified following Esslin 1989: 106–07; drawing also on Asmuth 1997b; Fischer-Lichte 1983a; Hickethier 2001a; Borstnar, Pabst, and Wulff 2002; Lohmeier 1996; Tomasi 1988; Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 67ff.; Pfister 1988: 263–64; Dyer 1999: 106–26. In the past, the literature has often combined aspects on the level of discourse with elements of what is being represented. Furthermore, the situation of reception, spatial arrangement of the viewers and the technical apparatus, and the conventions of reception must also be considered (see Hans 2001: 25).

There is also the manner in which the character is constructed on higher structural levels, which will be presented later, such as their temporal development or position within a constellation of characters. Each of these areas can be investigated in more detail in relation to the character. Entire books could be written about 'character and actor', 'character and editing', 'character and framing', etc.⁷ I must limit myself here to beginning a discussion of a few particularly important cinematic devices and the concepts used to describe them. First, it will be useful to look at their various functions in production, on the one hand, and in reception and analysis, on the other hand.

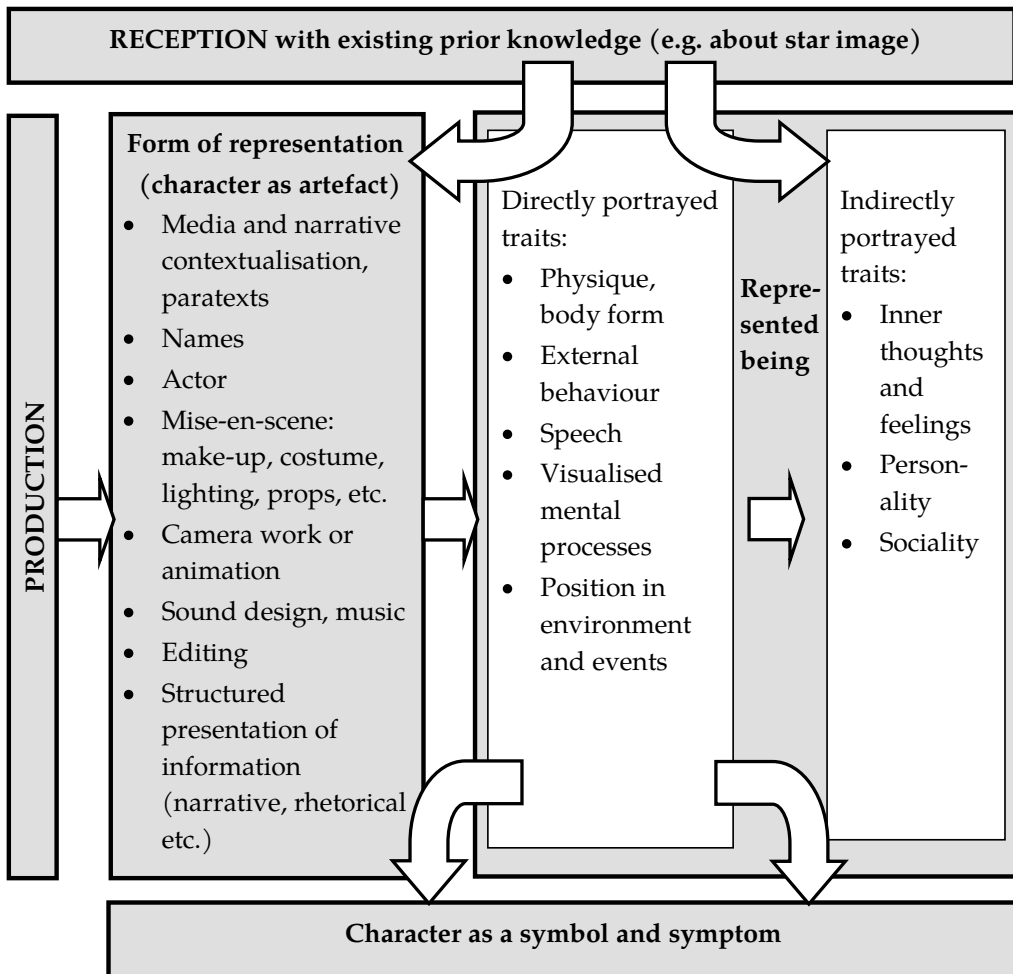


Diagram 15 Cinematic devices and levels of characterisation from the perspectives of production and reception

⁷ The significance of some particular complexes of signs, such as close-ups (e.g., in Béla Balázs) and actors (e.g., in the series of symposiums and books *Schauspielkunst im Film*; Siegfried Kracauer's 'Bemerkungen über den Schauspieler' 1964: 135–46), stand out. For information on sound design, see Flückiger 2001; with regard to characters and trailers, see Hediger 2001a: 80ff.

Diagram 15 organises the cinematic devices according to the context of production or reception. During the *production process*, they are linked to concrete practices in a multi-step process of representation shown progressing from left to right in the graphic: filmmakers use various filmic means to represent the characters' external features through sounds and images (characterisation on the level of the representation). In turn, these external characteristics refer to a character's traits that cannot be perceived directly, in particular inner life, personality, social positions, and nuances of relationships (characterisation on the level of what is represented). In many cases, the cinematic devices together with the perceptible and imperceptible traits are intended to inspire viewers to draw additional conclusions about indirect meanings and the characters' relation to reality (the lower portion of the graphic).

The important thing is that the representational techniques and processes of film production assume a different, less direct position in the viewers' *reception process*—from top to bottom in the diagram. We do not perceive them directly; they are mediated. We see the film rather than the camera. Our direct perception involves nothing more than sounds and images, light and sound waves. The perceptual experiences this produces can be described in phenomenological terms, for example as sounds, colours, shapes, rhythms, etc.; however, such descriptions soon run up against the limits of language.

One could say that beyond the direct perceptive impressions, our experiences separate and vacillate between several different forms. Through the film's sounds and images, we apparently grasp the character's external aspects immediately: body, movements, sounds, utterances, environments. These factors are already subject to involuntary processes of inference. For example, the character's body image is composed of various visual impressions (see Part III). Because audiovisual signs are basically similar to direct perception, we normally do not become consciously aware at first that an actor is shown from a certain camera angle and in a certain sequence of shots. Rather, we immediately see them as a person doing something, and must consciously pay attention to become aware and reflect on the way the character is represented.

Thus, our next processes of understanding go in two different directions (suggested by the upper arrows). Firstly, when we perceive the character's external characteristics and actions, we almost immediately draw conclusions about other psychological and social traits (right). Secondly, our attention can focus on the level of the representation (left). We use what we know about film production, its terminology and practices, to understand how our experiences of the characters are created and how the character was made. Together, all this can help us develop ideas about the characters' symbolic, thematic, or symptomatic meanings (bottom). When doing so, we can make use of the ways in which the characters are represented as clues about the filmmakers' communicative intentions and how the character is meant to be understood.

These considerations lead to the following consequences for character analysis. Firstly, a central difference exists between character reception and the direct perception of real people, since we can reflect upon the cinematic devices and are normally aware of them,

if only in a preconscious, subliminal way. Secondly, this is connected to a characteristic complexity of our experience. Character reception can be directed at, on one hand, the level of what is represented and of the represented beings. The viewers' conscious processes then focus on the phenomena of the represented world while the level of the representation fades into the background and viewers are able to 'see through it'. This corresponds to the illusionistic, unobtrusive storytelling that mainstream film aims at and that is supported by conventional representational techniques. On the other hand, the viewers' attention can be directed at the level of representation, the devices of characterisation, and the characters as artefacts. This kind of analytic stance can be consciously chosen or elicited by stylistic elements or techniques that draw attention to themselves. It can lead us to question how convincing the acting is, what role the editing plays in characterisation, etc. Furthermore, the terms used to discuss such representational techniques prove to be multifunctional. During the production process, these concepts are used to describe concrete artistic and cinematic practices. In analysis of camera, editing, etc., they have a dual function. Firstly, they can state that viewers in fact saw that, for example, an actor cast for a certain role employs a certain style. Secondly, and this is how they are more often used, the concepts serve to verbalise and explain the otherwise difficult to describe phenomenological experience of the viewers, who do not consciously register the form of representation. When we say 'The camera pans to Rick's face', we do not mean that the viewers are conscious of this, but that this technique enables their specific visual experience. Put briefly, we talk about the camera, but mean the visual experience it creates and try to explain how it is created.



Fig. 22 Characters in animated films (here Princess Fiona in *Shrek*) can be freely moulded, limited only by creativity and technology. Fiona's gestures and facial expressions were modelled on Cameron Diaz's, who also provided her voice. However, despite the quality of the animation, which was touted in marketing the film, the character's smooth, artificial appearance was often criticised. (Dir. Vicky Jenson/Andrew Adamson, *Shrek*, 2001, DreamWorks Animation, USA. All rights reserved.)

Analytical concepts of the textual design of characters thus serve both a phenomenological-descriptive and an explanatory function. The essential devices on the level of cinematic representation can be classified in four areas which will be outlined in the following sections: contexts of medium and narrative; naming; casting and acting; and film form in mise-en-scene, camerawork, sound design, and editing. The area of film acting is of fundamental importance and it will be discussed here in greater detail than the others.

Contexts of Medium and Genre

The employment and comprehension of character-related cinematic devices are influenced by a number of structural contexts that will be dealt with in greater detail in later chapters, the most important being medium, genre, character constellation, plot structure, and theme.

Every character is presented in a certain medium, which influences perception: 'In radio plays, the quality of the voice is the main thing; in silent films, the screen presence and the concise expression through gestures and facial expression is significant; in photo novels, gestures are important rather than fluid expression' (Wulff 1996: 43ff.). Feature films are characterised by moving images, usually combined with sound and music, which correspond with the perception of reality, but do not allow for interaction (in contrast to computer games). In their relationship with film characters, the viewers tend to be confined to an observer position and to expect movement and action. There is also a big difference between live-action film and the various types of animated film, which make it easier to shape characters, especially those that deviate from real human persons, down to individual details (Figure 22; see Eder 2023a).

Film conventions change according to various historical and cultural modes and styles of filmmaking, and as a result, they activate different bodies of knowledge among viewers and can give similar signs different meanings. Awareness of what is possible in the medium influences expectations regarding the techniques. For example, whether I watch a silent film or a sound film without the dialogue makes a difference. Not using the available means can say something about the characters, or in this case emphasise something about the fact that they are calm or close-mouthed. A character in a silent film gesticulating in an expressive manner is normal, while in sound film it might seem stylised and therefore symbolise something.

Within the medium, the character is embedded in the contexts of genre, narrative structure, and the film's overall meaning or message, all of which suggest certain ideas concerning the characters (Dyer 1999: 114ff.). Prior information concerning the genre, such as that provided by trailers, is often the basis for far-reaching assumptions. When, for example, a character is shown a great deal early in an action film, the viewers would be justified in assuming that this is a courageous hero who will survive difficult external conflicts. A film's dramatic structure and the relationships between story

and plot (Eder 1999) exercise a decisive influence on the characters. The structure guides the development of character models. Viewers' impressions are formed when a character is introduced, when a fact is revealed, when something is shown or hidden. The kind of plot, e.g., a romance or a revenge story, additionally suggests a 'global and comprehensive attribution of motives', and it can be assumed that the characters have certain general objectives and intentions (Wulff 1996: 43–44). This is connected with their position in a character constellation that involves typical conflict patterns (see Chapter 10). In a conventional plot with typified characters, their functions can be so evident that viewers are able to deduce the character's fundamental traits and behaviours from the character constellation alone (even without any psychological conclusions). Viewers essentially know how James Bond, his 'girls', and his opponents will behave (Eco 1984b), unless the pattern of the franchise changes, such as in the more recent Bond movies with Daniel Craig. To some extent, characters are also judged according to how well they fulfil their function in the plot. The construction of the character model is also influenced by the film's theme, which can be established through setting, iconography, visual symbols, voice-over commentary, music, etc., and in some cases is even revealed by the poster's tagline. Each character occupies a position in the film's thematic field and performs thematic functions that can at times be guessed at without knowing the character (Chapter 11). From theme and genre, we can assume that the character will have certain attributes; if the film deals with romance, the protagonist can be expected to be passionate. Medium, genre, constellation, plot, and theme together form a general background for the following, more concrete stylistic devices. The first of these (naming and acting) can also be found in other media, but take on specific forms in film.

Naming

Although a character's proper name represents one of its social traits in the fictional world, it is often perceived also—or even more—as an intentional tool of characterisation. Literary studies accord names special significance, as they serve in linguistic texts as an anchor for identity and a focus of the attributions of traits. Mainstream films, on the other hand, are more careful when employing expressive names like 'John Doe' as characterisation, because they call attention to the representation. Nevertheless, names sometimes contribute to characterisation in various ways.⁸ Both their acoustic quality and how they look in written form can suggest physical or other features: the rounded 'Oblomov' corresponds associatively with the character's corpulence; the hard consonants in 'Stanley Kowalski' contrast with the soft 'Blanche Dubois' (*A Streetcar Named Desire*; see Dyer 1999: 109). Furthermore, the style of articulation, the mouth movements made when pronouncing the names can indicate something

8 With regard to the following, see Rimmon-Kenan 1996: 67–68, drawing on Hamon; Dyer 1999: 109.

about the personality. What do we expect someone named 'Grshtshnik' to be like? A morphological indication can be provided by a name's etymological roots, such as 'die' or 'dye' in 'Dyer'. Names have social implications and can indicate the character's origin, social class, and ethnic group (Kowalski compared to Dubois, again; or 'von Wolfenstein' compared to 'Kohut' or 'Özdemir'). Sometimes, characters choose their own name and characterise themselves, such as when Homer Simpson vainly renames himself 'Max Power'. In addition, names can transfer intertextual references to the character: 'Louis Cypher' in *Angel Heart* is fairly easily recognised. The lack of a name can also be significant: the name of the mysterious protagonist in *C'era una volta il West/Once Upon a Time in the West* is never revealed at all (the reason the other characters call him 'Harmonica').

Casting

One of the factors that influence character construction most significantly is the casting of actors in a film's roles. Casting determines not only the characters' appearance and personality, but also acting styles and star images that affect them. If Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart were not cast for the leading roles of *Casablanca*, but Ann Sheridan and Ronald Reagan instead—as was announced in a planted press release—the final film would certainly be seen differently (Harmetz 2001: 89). The casting process for *Evita* lasted more than sixteen years (Manthey 1999: 151), and Raquel Welch, Ann-Margret, Bette Midler, Barbra Streisand, Diane Keaton, Olivia Newton-John, and Meryl Streep were discussed for the title role before Madonna was selected. Considering the wide range of actresses under discussion to play Evita Peron makes this a practical commutation experiment (see Thompson 1978). Imagining other actors in the role with the same staging may help envision the contribution made by casting and the actors.

However, not all roles are played by actors, and numerous exceptions to the convention of having one actor for every character can be found. Actors appear in animation films in the form of their voices alone. Non-human characters such as Lassie, the Tyrannosaurus rex in *Jurassic Park*, and the great white shark in *Jaws* are generated on a computer or played by models or trained animals. Stunt performers and body doubles fill in for actors. In *Psycho*, Norman Bates' mother is a compilation of three bodies and six voices (Maltby 2003: 371). Sometimes, one actor plays more than one character: Alec Guinness appeared in *Kind Hearts and Coronets* as eight members of a single family, and no less than twenty-seven different parts were performed by Rolf Leslie in *Sixty Years a Queen* (Robertson 2001: 105). Such multiple roles direct the viewers' attention toward the characters' similarity on the one hand, the actors' skill at transforming themselves on the other, and often also add an element of comedy. The reverse, casting more than one actor for a single role, is rare and disrupts perception. A single character being played by several different actresses who look quite different

(as in *Palindromes*) seems to produce a logical rupture in the character's identity, puts their external features into question and has a powerful alienation effect. Another kind of disruption results when the appearances of actor and character are meant to appear similar but are clearly at odds with each other, such as with the racist practice of blackface in early Hollywood, in which grotesquely made-up white actors play people of colour (Smith 1995: 30ff.). Whether such discrepancies between performer and role are emphasised or concealed, they always lead to consequences for the reception and analysis of the character. This concerns not least various issues of a politics of representation, such as the question of which types of actors are allowed to play which types of characters, which is raised in discussions about specific films, about colourblind casting, about red-, yellow- or pinkfacing, or about the diversity policies of streaming providers and film funding bodies.



Fig. 23 Blackface was common in early Hollywood movies: African Americans were played by whites with black greasepaint on their faces, usually in an explicitly defamatory way like here in Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (Walter Long as Gus). (Dir. D. W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*, 1915, David W. Griffith Corp., USA. Public domain.)

On the whole, stars play relatively few of the very many roles in movies, but they attract the particular interest of a wide audience.⁹ Stars represent idealised human types

⁹ Since the late 1990s, numerous publications on this theme have appeared, e.g., the special issues of

and therefore provide opportunities for identification, role models that are imitated, objects of desire, and advertising figures. They profoundly influence their characters not only by means of their specific acting style, but also through their image, which has been constructed by means of films, past roles, interviews, press reports, and self-presentations. The image—in part intentionally and in part by coincidence—affects the character in a film. The image is a complex of signs or mental representations of the star and their characteristics. It is built up by public statements about them and their private life ('offscreen image') and by their acting in previous roles ('onscreen image'; see Dyer 1999: 34; Lowry and Korte 2000: 10ff.). The various elements of the image can reinforce one another, creating a more coherent image, e.g., John Wayne's massive body and his association with the Wild West, together with right-wing politics, chivalrous behaviour, and independence from women (if only onscreen). However, they can also conflict (Dyer 1999: 63–64).

Star images influence the character model to various extents. Because they include elements from the star's real life or at least the publicised version of it, they may add an appearance of realism and authenticity to the character. At the same time, the star image also makes us aware that a famous actor is playing the character, thereby foregrounding the level of representation. Of particular importance for analysis is the relationship between image and role, which can take on different forms (Dyer 1999: 127ff.):

- With a *perfect fit*, all of the star image's characteristics match those of the role, which is the case in most of John Wayne's films and with roles written with a certain actor in mind. After actor Elliot Page transitioned from a woman to a man in 2020, the female character Vanya, who he played in the series *The Umbrella Academy*, became a trans man as well and the name was changed to Viktor. Occasionally, stars or other public personalities also play themselves in cameos, such as Bruce Willis in *The Player* (Robertson 2001: 89–90).
- Films can also make *selective use* of the image and emphasise certain features while ignoring others. For example, the romantic elements of Robert Redford's image are emphasised by means of glamorous lighting (*The Great Gatsby*) or downplayed (*All the President's Men*).
- *Contradictions* can also crop up between a star image and other characterisation devices. Dyer sees an example of this in the casting of naive and innocent Marilyn Monroe as the cynical, calculating Lorelei in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. When a role is clearly miscast, the conflict between role and image is not resolved, though one of the two can prevail in a satisfying manner.

- A conscious *ironic break* with the star image is also possible. For example, Henry Fonda appears as an especially evil gunman in *C'era una volta il West/Once Upon a Time in the West*, though he had always played heroes up to that point. In *Pulp Fiction*, the images of several stars are ironically played with in light of their past roles: the former disco star John Travolta plays a cool killer, dancing the slowest twist in his career; Bruce Willis overdraws his hero image as a sword-swinging boxer; and Christopher Walken (*The Deer Hunter*) appears as an oddball Vietnam veteran.

In other words, the star image contributed by the actor plays an important role in character analysis. One could say more generally that casting determines various relationships between actor and role: whether a single character is played by several different actors—or one actor plays several different characters—in the same film, which human type the character is classified as, whether a discrepancy arises between this human type and the role, how conspicuous the actor's performance is, etc. Casting also represents the foundation for the specific manner in which characters are played.

Acting

One of the most important elements of character construction is the actor's performance, which can be analysed as a mimetic and physical sign system.¹⁰ The actor's physique and voice are displayed in the film and become part of the character. For example, close-ups in *Casablanca* highlight the beauty of both Ingrid Bergman and Ilsa Lund. Above all, however, actors represent the characters' behaviour, which involves two separate levels. In the fictional world, characters perform certain actions, such as murders or declarations of love. In reality, the actors perform acts of representation; they move their bodies and produce sounds without in fact carrying out the actions that the character does (Urmson 1992: 563). In *C'era una volta il West/Once Upon a Time in the West*, Frank shoots a boy, but Henry Fonda does nothing more than point a prop pistol at a child actor. Due to this dualism of the actor's performance, the viewer's attention oscillates between character and actor. Viewers can be interested in what happens to a character or in the star's acting; they can think an actor does a good job and still feel that the character misses the mark (see Keppler 1995; Wulff 1996: 47). In this regard, Maltby distinguishes between two poles of acting styles (2003: 380-391): 'autonomous performance' turns the acting into a conspicuously foregrounded visual spectacle, such as through exhibition of sophisticated acting skills, a star's charisma, or physical virtuosity, e.g., in dance or fight scenes. On the other hand, (narratively) 'integrated performance' aims at unobtrusiveness and psychological credibility; the

10 There is a great deal of literature on this topic, such as Naremore 1988; Dyer 1999: 132-50; Riis 2008; Taylor 2012; Hickethier 1982, 1990, 2000, 2001a: 169-89; Koebner 1998; Marschall and Grob 2000; Fischer-Lichte 1983a (for theatre).

viewers should forget that the character is being played by an actor. Integrated acting is more common, and the character's behaviour is normally foregrounded in our experience, while we are less conscious of the performance.

For this reason, analysis of character construction requires an awareness of the actors' performance: the manner in which their acts of representation take place and how they move, deliver lines, and employ body language, such as Fonda's rigid posture when acting out the murder of a child.¹¹ Analysing acting involves the difficulty of finding adequate descriptions of ambiguous, variable objects, the finest nuances of which can alter the effect completely—e.g., the difference between a 'real' and a 'fake' smile. Another difficulty is the relationship of the actor's performance to comparable actions in real life on the one hand and to conventions of representation in filmmaking on the other hand.

Expression of a character's intentions, thoughts, and feelings through body language, and gestures and the face in particular, is almost always oriented toward the repertoire of signs and cultural conventions of expression in the everyday world (see Chapter 6). When an actor overacts, this expression is, however, exaggerated, made clearer, and intensified, such as by means of poses or hyper-expressive faces, in order to make it more easily comprehensible, create a comic element, or make a comment on or caricature the character. In underacting, the expression is reduced compared to everyday life for the purpose of adapting to the medium, making the character more enigmatic and interesting, or inviting the viewers to actively imagine the character's situation. Thus, viewers interpret the actor's performance signs in relation to everyday behaviour by using folk psychology, but at the same time as conventional signs, using their knowledge of acting and the medium. The two levels often merge unnoticed: a character's action can seem natural, not only because it corresponds to everyday experience, but also because it conforms to familiar media conventions.¹²

In addition, the conventions concerning what is considered inconspicuous or ostentatious change (Maltby 2003: 389). The unmistakable gestures and facial expressions in early silent films would seem grotesque in everyday life, while at the time, viewers considered them normal. Conventions also depend on genre, other actors' performances, and additional filmic contexts (Dyer 1999: 147). When someone overacts in a comic manner in a character study, this can seem contradictory, while it would not arouse a great deal of attention in a comedy. At times, the difference between 'natural' and 'acted' behaviour is apparently simply ignored. In other cases—

11 See Dyer 1999: 134, and the sections on body language in Chapter 6. Knut Hickethier's concept of 'performance' more emphatically refers to a 'non-narrative temporal presence of the actor in their non-discursive sensuousness' (Hickethier 2001a: 172), a shift of emphasis to the actor's physicality, which is particularly distinct when the plot comes to a standstill and at the reduction of other aesthetic means (Hickethier 2000: 254). James Naremore understands 'performance' as referring to all forms of public demonstration and acting as a special case of that (Naremore 1988: 22–23).

12 Possibly, understanding an actor's performative signs also depends on familiarity with how they are created (e.g., through the empathic process of method acting; see Dyer 1999: 136).

with unfamiliar conventions, intentional stylisation, and exaggeration, for example—the difference is noticeable. The discrepancy between common, everyday body signals and actors' performances may then be considered either unsuccessful, or as an intentional stylistic device.

As a result, the performance can seem more or less natural or artificial, stylised, or alienating. However, 'natural' acting also normally deviates from everyday forms of expression, because acting in film always takes place in a field of tension between the principle of comprehensibility and that of reduction, of media-driven underacting. On the one hand, the actor's performance normally aims at comprehensibility. Viewers should understand what is happening inside the character as clearly as possible. As a result, the physical expression in the acting is intentional and apparent, while in everyday life it is coincidental or concealed for tactical purposes or to be tactful. On the other hand, the requirement of conveying mental processes as clearly as possible conflicts with that of reducing expression through gestures and facial expressions to compensate for their greater visibility on the screen.

In representations of powerful emotions in particular, the reduction of animated expression to the point of immobility is expected. An unmoving face that seems petrified after a catastrophic situation or event becomes the expressive ideal. (Hickethier 2001a: 173)

Acting technique must therefore be adapted to situations and shot sizes. Maximum clarity achieved with a minimum of means is often the objective. Film actors act for and toward the camera, and they normally only act out short sequences of actions. In contrast to stage actors, their acting is discontinuous. According to Knut Hickethier, the 'basic principles of filmic acting' include intense performance that avoids exaggeration, playing for the camera while still seeming natural, and dissecting the performance into individual actions that together seem to make a whole (2001a: 175). Thus, acting aimed at naturalistic representation is highly artificial and always involves the danger of drawing attention to the process of representation and making the character seem stilted, implausible, or alienated.

In the forms of autonomous acting, a performance's conspicuousness is considered not a danger but an opportunity. It aims specifically at stylisation or liberation of the physical from the restrictions of verisimilitude or logic. The spectrum of non-realistic acting is large: in comedies and musicals, it often appears in the form of physical virtuosity, such as the comic acrobatics of a Buster Keaton or the acrobatic dancing of a Fred Astaire. In some auteur films, such as those of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, actors demonstrate a consciously artificial, role-distant acting.¹³ These performers accentuate that they are playing a part. The purpose of doing so is to draw attention to the level of representation, question the meaning of performative alienation, and present the

¹³ In everyday life, role distance refers to an individual who satisfies behavioural expectations associated with their social role and at the same time signals that this role is not personally satisfying (Wulff 1999a: 274–76, drawing on Goffman).

character as a didactic example or a symbol to be looked at from an analytical distance. Hickethier, for example, describes Magdalena Montezuma's acting style in Werner Schroeter's films as mask and doll-like, determined by conventionalised figures of expression and gestures and poses removed from their context (Hickethier 1997: 46).

Thus, the actor's manner of representing a character can be examined in light of its relationship to reality, to film conventions, and to aesthetic intentions and styles. When doing so, a generalisation can be made about the performances of individual actors and about universal acting styles, i.e., the acting conventions that can be identified in the work of a group of actors, in a genre, or during a certain period.¹⁴ Acting styles are not only based on achieving intended effects, for example comedy, they often reflect certain conceptions of human nature, as well. Richard Dyer has compiled a typology of acting styles in Hollywood cinema (1999: 136ff.):

- The vaudeville and music-hall styles, employed for comic gags and musical numbers, is characterised by stylised, antirealistic, overdrawn, or distancing representation, such as exaggerated, rhythmic gestures or precise timing.
- The melodramatic style presents moral affects in expressive, intense, direct, and evaluative ways, and also employs conventionalised gestures and poses.
- In the Hollywood studio (and radio) style, which is typical for classical Hollywood cinema until the 1950s, stars mainly play themselves; their familiar mannerisms and presence are intended to make the character seem familiar and individualise it at the same time.
- In contrast, actors such as Laurence Olivier disappear behind the character in the repertory or Broadway style, adapting to the role. This style, adopted from the stage, is based on observation and demonstrates particular attention to details and naturalistic precision. Each gesture should be meaningful and relevant to the plot, and careful articulation makes the character seem extremely thoughtful, which can also leave an impression of artificiality.
- The Method style, which was made famous by stars such as Marlon Brando, favours the emotional over the rational. The objective is psychoanalytically based display of unconscious impulses that drive the character, and of its desires, confusion, and anger; powerful emotions or slips are often depicted. This style has become dominant in Hollywood cinema since the 1960s.

14 The theories of acting styles considered from the perspective of actors is of less interest for our subject. Whether the actor acts 'from the outside in' in the tradition of Denis Diderot or follows Konstantin Stanislavski and employs method acting, putting him or herself in the character's situation 'from the inside out' (Dyer 1999: 132–33; Maltby and Craven 1995: 246–68), says a great deal about the production process but relatively little about its results.



Fig. 24 Expressionist acting and make-up in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Werner Krauss as Caligari). (Dir. Robert Wiene, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920, Decla-Film, Germany. Public domain.)

Knut Hickethier describes other acting styles in German film, such as the highly rhythmic, syncopated, and tense movements in expressionistic cinema (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari/The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*; Figure 24) and the reserved, sober underacting in films of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* ('New Objectivity') such as *Menschen am Sonntag/People on Sunday* (Hickethier 2001a: 173–75). At the same time, acting can subversively undermine the way the role was intended. Hickethier sees elements of this in the physical acting of Hans Albers, possibly intended to contradict the National Socialist ideology present in his roles (ibid.: 181). Charles Ramírez Berg points out the ability of Latino actors in Hollywood cinema to give dignity and nuance to even stereotyped roles (2002: Chapter 4). However, the role and staging often prove to be stronger. Ferdinand Marian, who played the title role in Veit Harlan's inflammatory *Jud Süß*, apparently tried, but failed, to undermine the part and arouse understanding for the film's Jewish protagonist.¹⁵ More generally, actors who portray characters from marginalised social groups may face the challenge of conveying the code-switching that members of such groups must perform in their everyday speech, depending on

¹⁵ See the docudrama *Jud Süß: Ein Film als Verbrechen?* dir. by Horst Königstein and Joachim Lange (Germany, 2001).

whether they move in their own community or in formal contexts of the social majority (for example, through the use or non-use of African American Vernacular English or German-Turkish language variants). This is complicated by the fact that these actors usually have to address a target audience from the majority group at the same time, which in turn can reinforce the stereotyping of the marginalised group and their way of speaking.

These examples show the importance of analysing the interplay between script, staging, acting styles, and individual actors' performance in order to understand characters and their effects. Another essential element is the character's representation through a number of cinematic devices, which have been compiled in the following section.

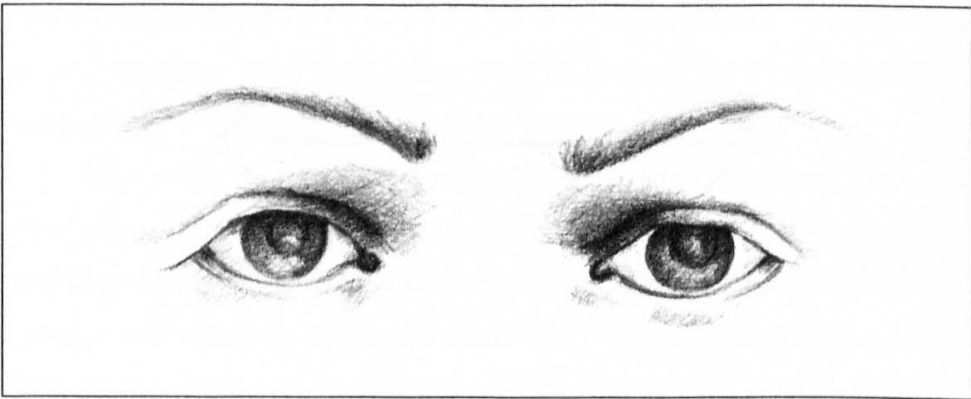


Fig. 25 Humphrey Bogart wearing platform shoes during the shooting of *Casablanca*. From Propagandakrieg in "Rick's Café. (Associated Press. All rights reserved.)

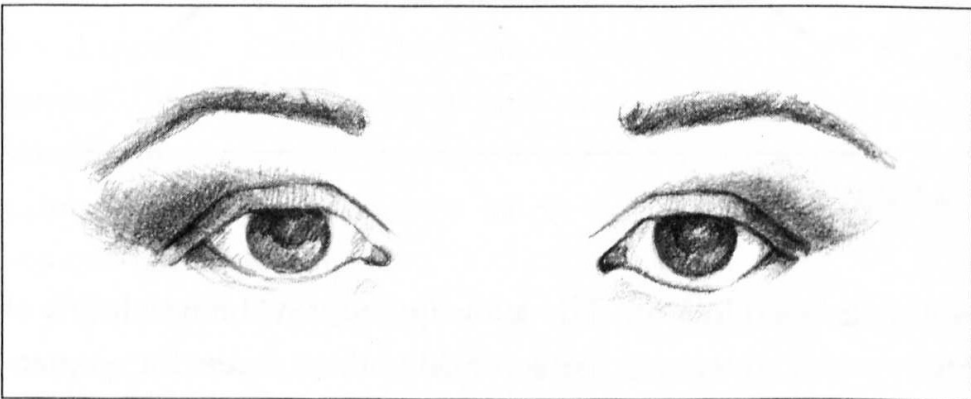
Audiovisual Style

Characters are so central to films that the entire audiovisual style is usually geared primarily towards them: for example, shot sizes and image compositions are named after the relationship to characters' bodies, e.g., as a medium shot or two shot. The many means of audiovisual style, such as mise-en-scene (including sets, costumes, make-up, lighting, and staging), cinematography, sound and editing, shape the actor's performance and the resulting character in so many ways that I must limit myself here to a few general distinctions and brief examples.

Firstly, all cinematic devices present the body, voice, behaviour, or expression of the actors and characters in a certain way, often influencing and changing their appearance without the viewers being consciously aware of it. For example, Rick Blaine was supposed to appear taller than Ilsa Lund, but Humphrey Bogart was shorter than Ingrid Bergman, which is why he sometimes had to wear platform shoes during filming (Figure 25). Costume, makeup, camera angle, and other devices can also alter the character's body image in relation to the actor's actual body (Figure 26).



Narrowing with Eye Shadow.



Widening with Eye Shadow.

Fig. 26 Make-up can change the appearance and expression of characters in subtle but effective ways. (Illustration from McNeill 1998: 298. All rights reserved.)

Secondly, according to Dario Tomasi (1988: 165), the audiovisual style not only portrays the bodies, voices, and behaviour of individual characters in a certain way, but also fulfils further functions of characterisation: it creates privileged spaces that accentuate the character's personality and actions and intensify their effects. It indicates relationships between characters and objects, thus also depicting the characters' sociality. It expresses their personality or momentary state in a situation. And it can subjectify the narrative world, showing it from the character's perspective. One can add that the manner of representation can also serve as a commentary on the character from a higher narrating instance.



Fig. 27 The conspicuous clothes of the characters in Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* serve to contrast and characterise them in an ironic way. (Dir. Wes Anderson, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, 2001, Touchstone Pictures/American Empirical Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.)

Thus, the cinematic style performs various functions.¹⁶ It focuses attention on certain aspects of the character's external features and environment, in this way guiding how their psyche and sociality are understood. It points from the present to their past or future. It suggests experiences or interests through subjective perspective or 'audiovisual metaphors' (Fahlenbrach 2010) or enables superior knowledge by means of multiple perspectives. It conveys higher meanings and symbols, and expresses the filmmaker's views of the characters. As a result, the cinematic style of representation allows the viewers to grasp the action in a concrete manner, positions viewers in particular relationships with the characters, and creates forms of (shared) experience that are more or less close to folk perception, memory, dreams, or imagination (see also Chapter 13).

Like the actor's performance, the use of audiovisual means also develops between the poles of inconspicuous illusion and the conspicuous and spectacular. Many comedies or auteur films, for example, use unusual or exaggerated make-up, props, or costumes (Figure 27). However, most mainstream films tend to avoid drawing attention to themselves as films, instead aiming at a balance between comprehensibility, expressivity, and the avoidance of artificiality. Camerawork, mise-en-scene, sound, and editing are used so that we view the characters as represented beings rather than as artefacts and so that we are given an optimal perspective on them. At the same time, inner life and sociality, feelings and motives are all to be conveyed as understandably and expressively as possible so as to heighten the emotional effect. These aims in using audiovisual style often conflict with one another. Stylistic conventions have been developed that work as a successful compromise (the 'institutional mode of representation').¹⁷ They correspond in part to our natural manner of perception, but also subtly call attention to important elements of character and story. Various techniques are employed for this purpose:

- The camera photographs the characters at approximately eye level, in a frontal but not direct view, and often in a three-quarter profile. The sizes of most shots generally vary between close-ups and medium shots, so that both the face and the arms and upper body can easily be seen. Framing follows basic relational patterns, such as two-shots or three-shots. The most important characters are centred in the frame and occupy the foreground. A moving frame is often used and the camera follows the character's movements inconspicuously (reframing); face and hands are paid particular attention. Panoramic shots and close-ups, off-centre framing, looking into the camera, extremely canted or parallel perspectives, and conspicuous camera movements (e.g., swish pans) are comparatively rare.

16 For more on how audiovisual techniques are experienced and have effects on viewers, see Fahlenbrach 2003; Kappelhoff 2007.

17 See Kuhn 1996: 216, drawing on Burch 1981.

- The editing's 'continuity system' involves an entire code of rules for subtly depicting characters and their behaviour. This includes, for example, placing characters in a space of action by means of master shots, a cut on action at movements, point-of-view editing for dialogues, adherence to the 30- and 180-degree rules and thus the avoidance of irritating perspective changes and jump cuts. Particularly long takes and confusingly fast sequences of cuts also tend to be avoided.
- Sound design is employed to bring dialogue and significant sounds clearly and understandably out from their acoustic surroundings, ambient noise. Many of the characters' actions, such as punches and footsteps, are highlighted or dramatised by sound effects, often created by foley artists.

Deviations from such standard conventions are not rare even in mainstream film, though they are employed because of the plot or to express something. A few examples might illustrate their importance. An unstable posture highlighted by the framing can suggest mental instability; a low camera angle can make the character seem more powerful. The stark, low-key lighting in film noir makes characters seem tougher and less vulnerable (see Dyer 1999: 117); a pinpoint spot on the eyes of a character in the shadows can create a strong, or uncanny, impression; and low-angle lighting can make a face seem demonic, while bright backlighting can make it seem ethereal (Hickethier 2001a: 82). Make-up can be employed to transform a little girl into a devilish victim of possession (*The Exorcist*), Jack Nicholson into a werewolf (*Wolf*), or a young David Bowie into a 150-year-old man (*The Hunger*). In *Pleasantville*, the digital colour grading organises the characters into two antagonistic groups, those in colour and those in black and white. Colours may also evoke more general associations with emotional qualities, and this is particularly marked in the area of wardrobe: *The Lady in Red* versus *Men in Black*. Diegetic and non-diegetic music can characterise or function as a sign of characters by means of leitmotifs (the murderer whistling Grieg's 'In the Hall of The Mountain King' in *M*; the sluggish bass runs in *Cruel Intentions*), and they can also influence affective attitudes to them or express their moods (scenes of empathy in melodramas) and trigger expectations of actions (suspenseful music). Sound design influences the pleasant or unpleasant effect of the voices and sounds characters produce, the comprehensibility of their dialogues, the power attributed to them (loud blows in fight scenes), and the dangerous situations they enter (the sound of lightsabres). Editing orders images of the character and provides them with a framework. Characters' bodies and behaviours can be particularised, accentuated, and commented on by means of editing. Even if the Kuleshov effect was a myth, its basic principle is valid, that a shot of a characters' facial expression is interpreted on the basis of the adjoining shots (food: hunger; child: a father's pride). During post-production, the character's face and body can be altered and retouched in various ways by computer processing. Compositing can merge two characters (*Persona*) or be used for alienation effects.

That the audiovisual means of shaping characters often have ideological tendencies is shown by the conventions of representation for white protagonists and stereotypical minorities in Hollywood cinema (see Berg 2002: 42–54). The heroes in Hollywood films are usually male WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants), and these roles are generally played by stars. Minorities, on the other hand, appear more often in supporting roles and are cast less prominently. Most shots show the protagonist, are usually closer to the actor and of longer duration compared to shots showing other characters. In shots with multiple characters, the protagonist appears in the part of the frame that receives the most attention: the T-shaped area that encompasses the vertical third in the centre and the upper horizontal third. The camera focuses on the protagonist at eye level or slightly from below, while the secondary characters are more often photographed from the hero's perspective or from above. The lighting emphasises the hero and is set to white skin by default, while the facial nuances of actors with darker complexions are less visible (as shown above, Black filmmakers such as Barry Jenkins, Jordan Peele, or Steve McQueen work against this with sophisticated techniques; see Figure 21). Make-up and wardrobe also emphasise the main character and their positive qualities, for example through colourful clothing. The protagonist's skin blemishes are concealed by make-up, while secondary characters are given physical flaws or subcultural signs (e.g., scars, tattoos). The acting style of the protagonists is often more 'naturalistic' and individualised, while that of the supporting characters and antagonists is more exaggerated and stereotypical. The staging often emphasises the main character's confident body language, while the other characters move more restlessly. The set design can hint at emerging social conflicts, e.g., when the hero finds himself in an unfamiliar, threatening, and run-down neighbourhood. The main character gets the smartest, quickest-witted, or coolest lines. He is occasionally accompanied by musical leitmotifs, while secondary characters and antagonists are associated with unpleasant or stereotypical noises that sometimes signal danger. Such filmic devices set the (white) main character apart from other (stereotypical) characters in a way that is clearly recognisable to the audience, even without considering the plot.

The various means used to construct and present characters can harmonise or conflict with one another. They may correspond to genre conventions or documentary forms, or differ from them. In this way, films can facilitate, hinder, complicate, or prevent understanding of their characters; they can explore the limits of the human or construct fantasy characters. Often, though, they aim at creating uniform, coherent, 'realistic' character models similar to mental representations of real people. For this purpose, the character must conform to both the viewers' lifeworld dispositions and media-specific conventions of realism. In order to create a realistic impression, construction of the character can be either more or less inconspicuous, as in mainstream cinema, or it can emphasise the level of representation by employing conventions of documentary film—jerky handheld camera, ambient sound, natural lighting, etc.—such as in the Dogme 95 films or *The Blair Witch Project*. Such depictions of fictional

characters can even be mistaken for ones of real people, when an uninformed viewer tunes into a television broadcast by chance. In terms of handicraft, the objective of creating realism is difficult to achieve. Errors at all levels of production—implausible scripts, poor actors, sloppy directing—can destroy the impression of reality. Other objectives can also stand in the way, as most characters are not just intended to seem realistic, but also dramatic, aesthetic, glamorous, frightening, disturbing, etc. For this reason, some film genres systematically deviate from everyday 'realism'. A basic method employed in comedy is exaggerating characters, overdrawing their features compared to real life or other genres. Action and adventure films are characterised by idealisation and dramatisation. While a number of different strategies of 'realistic' representation, such as detailed representation of the fictional world, are employed in fantasy and science-fiction films, this world and its inhabitants—fantasy characters, aliens, monsters—differ from our lifeworld. Make-up, wardrobe, and special effects are employed to great effect for this purpose.

In contrast to this combination of the fantastic with stylistic realism, character construction that is non-realistic and as conspicuous as possible can be used specifically to emphasise that the character is an artificial construct rather than a real person. Basically, each and every representational technique can be employed in such a way that it contradicts everyday ideas of realism or media conventions, making it conspicuous. Some characters suddenly switch from one semiotic level to another (Figure 20). The title character in *Lola rennt/Run Lola Run* is played by the actress Franka Potente, but also appears as an animated version in some sequences. Characters in Eisenstein's films are often embedded in montages that provide commentary, and their conspicuous characterisation clearly comes from an auctorial narrating instance. In expressionist films such as *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari/The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the characters inhabit an improbably distorted world of bizarre shapes and forms, and are highly stylised themselves. Gestures and facial expressions are artificial and exaggerated, their movements have a syncopated rhythm, their eyes and faces are made up in a conspicuous manner, and their faces and clothing show extreme contrasts of black and white. In Douglas Sirk's melodramas (e.g., *Imitation of Life*), the environment, the hyperbole of the aestheticised, gloriously colourful, and immaculately glossy luxury of interiors crammed with mirrors and pillows is what rubs off on the characters. According to a contemporary reviewer, '[t]he characters talk *Ladies Home Journal*ese, and the screen glows like a page of *House Beautiful*. The moviegoer often has the sensation that he is drowning in a sea of melted butter, with nothing to hang on to but the clichés that float past' (quoted in Klinger 1994: 77–78). In this critic's opinion, the characters seem artificial and removed from reality because they conform too closely to journalistic and narrative patterns—which many Sirk fans now regard as a subversive strategy of ironic exaggeration.

In the films of Straub and Huillet, such as *Sicilia!*, the characters are stylised most strongly by their behaviour and manner of speaking. The actors are always rigid, and

when we expect reactions, their movements are wooden rather than fluid. They recite their lines with exaggerated clarity and little emotion, as if on a language-learning tape. Even more ironic is the characterisation of the two main female characters in Kluge and Reitz's *In Gefahr und größter Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod*. In addition to their absurd behaviour and opaque inner lives, the voice-over commentary of the first-person narrators also represents a powerful alienation device for actors who introduce themselves as an 'intercourse thief' (*Beischlafdiebin*) or a 'highly specialised expert for discovering state secrets' (*hochspezialisierte Fachkraft zur Ausspähung von Staatsgeheimnissen*). Uncritically, as if they had internalised these roles in a profound way, they employ impersonal officialese that conforms to neither everyday language nor the dramatic content (sex, theft, espionage), thereby exposing societal linguistic and thought structures. As these two examples show, the cinematic representational techniques also contribute significantly to guiding attention toward certain characters and creating an imaginative closeness to or distance from them (see Part VII of this book).

Connections between Representational Techniques: Two Scenes as Examples

The individual aspects of character representation that have been described statically above are in fact embedded in ongoing processes. Using as examples two invented scenes that were vaguely inspired by actual films, a start can be made in illustrating the complex interaction of characterisation techniques and their effects. These examples are constructed so that the characterisation shifts with each newly mentioned technique. (This thought experiment could be expanded upon by varying the contents of the table's individual cells, e.g., by replacing the entry from the parallel scene.)

	Scene 1	Scene 2
Action:	A man offers a little girl chocolate.	A man hits a little girl in the face.
Appearance:	The man is tall and obese, and is wearing an unfashionable suit. The girl is small, dainty, and pretty and wearing a white dress.	The man is short, thin, and almost disappears in an old-fashioned fur coat. The girl is wearing a black cloak, is sinewy, and has noticeably long canine teeth.
Gestures and Posture:	The man towers above her, rummaging about in his pockets; the girl is mincing about.	The man takes a large swing, but then holds back on the slaps he gives her; the girl is hanging limply in his arm; a barely noticeable tension ripples through her body.

Facial Expression:	A nasty grin spreads across the man's face, his eyes look around insanely; the girl looks all too trusting.	The man glances around fearfully and desperately. The girl blinks her half-closed eyes and tries to hide a scornful smile.
Surroundings:	The man and the girl are at the outskirts of a residential area; dark woods begin right behind them.	The man and the girl are on a snowy, deserted path in the mountains. On the mountain behinds them is a dark, ramshackle castle.
Mise-en-scene, Framing:	The man is lit from below, giving him an uncanny appearance. He is shown in a knee-shot; the girl is in a medium close shot.	The girl's face is in the shadows, with just her teeth and eyes occasionally glinting.
Perspective:	The man is shown from a low angle (POV of the girl), the girl in a high-angle over-the-shoulder shot.	The man is seen in a medium close shot from the perspective of the girl, whose face is shown in a close-up.
Sounds:	The chirping of birds is drowned out by the man's overly loud breathing.	The sound of the slaps; the wind and wolves howl.
Music:	A rhythmic ostinato behind the distorted melody of children's music.	Long, gliding dissonances, arpeggios, shrill violins.
Editing:	Slow, long takes on the faces.	Increasingly fast cuts back and forth, followed by slow motion.
Casting:	The man: Gert Fröbe, or Peter Lorre	The man: Roman Polanski, or Anthony Head
Title:	'It Happened in Broad Daylight 2'	'Murderous Child Vampires'
Dialogue:	With forced cheerfulness, but with an impatiently quavering voice, the man says that he is a 'nice magician'. The girl answers innocently in a soft voice.	The man shouts in despair: 'Why didn't I pay attention in the first aid course!?'
Characterisation/ Reactions by Others	Cut away – the police inspector to her assistant: 'We have to find this madman. He is capable of anything. The girl is in horrible danger'.	Cut away – The old mentor to a group of people armed with pointed wooden stakes: 'Charles wouldn't recognise a vampire if it was right in front of him!'
Back Story	The man had a traumatic childhood with an oppressive mother; his father died at an early age.	The girl has already sucked the blood out of hundreds of victims during her 300 years of life.

(Social) Situation	The man lives as a recluse with his mother, has no friends, no relationships.	The man is an English aristocrat from the country; his fiancée has become mysteriously ill.
Personality	His previous conduct has led us to believe that the man is paedophile, violent, cunning, schizoid, Oedipal.	The man is timid, insecure. The girl is a vampire willing to do anything.
Immediate Context in the Narrative	The man's mother swore at him and threw him out of the house.	The girl came from the castle and threw herself in front of the man's sled.
Motivation (Inferred from the Narrative Context)	The man is offering the girl chocolate to lure her away and kill her.	The man slaps the girl to re-awake her to life. The girl is pretending to be unconscious in order to be able to sink her teeth into the man's neck.

Not only the individual techniques in a scene, but also their narrative contexts affect how a character is assessed. Characters should for this reason be examined in the context of the film's plot (temporal context) and the character constellation (relational context). A character who seems evil at first can turn out to be good, or could be the most pleasant among other characters who are even worse.

Continuation of the Scene, Re-Definition of the Situation	The man gives the girl the chocolate, brings her to her parents, and goes on his way.	The man knocks the girl out.
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This short list suggests the amount of variety that the interplay of filmic techniques brings to strategies of characterisation. For example, a character's external features are conveyed not only by the actor's body, but by the make-up, choice of lens, perspective, lighting, sound design, and editing, as well. All character-related signs work together; they overlap, interact, and jointly create certain effects.

A Character's Aesthetic: Sound, Image, Movement, and Rhythm

The interplay of the filmic means of representation shapes the character in sound and image so that it can be analysed from an aesthetic point of view in terms of its visual, acoustic and other sensual forms and corresponding experiences. Suitable concepts can be found in various approaches in film studies and art history, the most detailed in essays on practical filmmaking.¹⁸ In analysing visuals, film characters can

¹⁸ My main points of reference for the following are Block 2001 and Ward 1996. For more on sound

be described firstly as contoured forms that are positioned within the frame and move within it. These forms are normally separated from their environment according to gestalt psychology's figure-ground principle and attract more attention. When several characters are present in a single frame, one or several of them can be in the foreground while the others are put in the background, receiving less attention.

At the same time, film characters are bodies represented in two dimensions. In the most abstract way, the human body on film can be formally regarded like a mannequin for draftsmen: as a system of approximately cylindrical, rounded, and conical parts, connected and shaped in more subtle ways—torso, head and neck, arms and legs, hands and fingers, feet and toes. When moving in relationship to each other, various outlines and forms are created by overlapping perspectives and foreshortening of the body parts. In this abstract way, the film image can be described as a framed plane on which two-dimensional representations of various forms of the characters' bodies are arranged in relation to one another. The movements of the characters and the camera alter this composition. Both the individual body shapes and their relationships within the composition can be described with the aid of the following categories (modified and expanded after Block 2001: Chapter 9):

- Space: characters' bodies can be shown partially or completely, onscreen or offscreen, appearing more or less distinct, plastic, voluminous, and massive. They are arranged, connected, or separated at different areas and depths in space.
- Lines and shapes: the contours of characters' bodies can make them look more or less rigid or dynamic, hard or soft.
- Shading and colour: the natural colours of skin, hair, eyes, or lips can be emphasised or altered by means of lighting, painting, or clothing. As a result, characters exhibit a large palette of shades that are lighter or darker, saturated or pale, vivid or greyish, warm or cold, and which are related in certain ways, clashing or harmonising with each other.
- Texture and materiality: the surfaces of characters' bodies and clothing show various textures with different haptic qualities, e.g., smoothness or roughness.
- Movement: characters' bodies and their parts move in various directions, at various speeds and levels of continuity, parallel to the image surface or into depth. Even simple walking produces a complex pattern of moving thighs, lower legs, arms, torso, and head.
- Rhythm: walking, dancing, and many other body movements are rhythmic, and these rhythms differ in terms of speed, regularity, acceleration or deceleration, continuity or level of fragmentation.

- Sounds: characters, their voices and movements are associated with sounds of a certain volume, frequency, tone quality, materiality, pitch, proximity or distance, temporal development, and rhythm (see Flückiger 2001).
- Composition and editing: characters assume variable positions within the composition and editing of the shots, and a number of typical patterns have developed here, such as the two-shot; overlap through staging; shot/reverse shots; or jump and match cuts.¹⁹

A character's specific effect on viewers' senses depends on how its visual and acoustic features are combined with each other and with the action grasped as part of constructing mental models. On both the level of the individual categories and between them, cross-modal similarities and contrasts, harmonies and disharmonies can develop. Many of the experiential forms differ in intensity. For example, loud sounds, signal colours, fast movements, large surfaces, dynamic lines, and stark contrasts attract attention, and so do certain forms and areas of the body, the face and eyes in particular. A basic principle of film design is that visual and acoustic intensity increases when the action becomes more intense, such as during a conflict (see Block 2001: Chapter 9).



Fig. 28 The interplay of various aesthetic factors, such as the composition of the images, makes Maria Braun's helplessness and loneliness palpable after she has heard that her husband will remain in prison. (Dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, 1978, Albatros Filmproduktion/Westdeutscher Rundfunk/Trio Film, Germany. All rights reserved.)

¹⁹ For more on the various forms of composition and editing, see, for example, Ward 1996; Katz 1998; Arijon 1976; Bordwell 2001.

Of course, such rules of thumb can only provide an approximate orientation. The interplay of many formal means of characterisation on several levels as well as the diversity and subtlety of possible nuances make the aesthetic form and composition of characters a highly complex system. This aesthetic complexity of characters is evident in many films. In Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, for example, the interplay of colour, light, sound, camera perspective, set design, and composition of the moving images makes Maria Braun's helplessness and loneliness palpable after she learns that her husband will remain in prison for '8 days or 8 years' (Figure 28); and this is just one scene of the film. All that means that, as artefacts, characters cannot be analysed in a purely formal and schematic way, but also require an approach guided by one's own sensory-affective experience as well as phenomenological reflection. Analysis means breaking down something complex into its individual elements. Given the aesthetic complexity of characters, there is a real danger of not seeing the wood for the trees when analysing them. Part of the challenge, however, is to start with seeing which trees make up this specific forest in order to ultimately gain a sharper eye for its uniqueness in its entirety. So, the aesthetic complexity of characters also requires us to be aware of the many factors that interact in their formal design as artefacts and their aesthetic experience by the audience.

Character analysis depends on the precise and suggestive description of selected key factors, and thus on their considered selection, which presupposes a certain focus. In order to find that focus, reduce complexity, and at the same time describe the temporal process of character representation in its effects, it makes sense to start with the general structures of distributing character-related information in the course of a film.

7.2 The Structure of Character Development: How Information Is Provided

We have seen that films provide character-related information, that is, various types of internal and external cues inviting processes of character reception in viewers. This information consists in the film's aesthetic form and style, the characters' traits as represented beings, and their higher meanings and connections to reality.²⁰ The question now is how this information is arranged in the film, its *structures*. Editing is only the most obvious form of such structuring. Films convey various kinds of

20 To be more precise: 1. The film's sounds and images serve to supply information about the character's perceptible traits. 2. These traits provide information about the character's traits that cannot be perceived directly: sociality, psyche, inner body states, past and future. 3. The film's cinematic devices also present information about the psyche and sociality. 4. Internal and external features and cinematic devices imply information about the character's indirect meanings (as a symbol) and communicative contexts (as a symptom), which in turn can serve as evidence relating to the areas named above. Fotis Jannidis employs a somewhat different concept of character information (2004: 198–207). His ideas, which will be described in the following, are nonetheless applicable.

character information synchronously and diachronically. This flow of information guides the development of mental character models, perspective, and affective involvement, including suspense, curiosity, and surprise. Films are strategically structured to present information about characters in ways that evoke such effects. The study of media has developed various approaches in order to analyse narrative and other structures of character-related information.²¹ Most of them focus on literature and theatre as primarily linguistic media but with some modifications, they can be adapted to the specifics of audiovisual media. By combining approaches from several disciplines, we can distinguish three crucial aspects of information relating to characters: the functions it fulfils, its mode of presentation, and its distribution throughout the (filmic) text.

Function and Relevance of Character Information

Character-related information can have at least the following functions (cf. Bordwell 1985b: 19ff.):²²

- Diegetic and plot-related functions: as characters belong to a represented world, any information about them also contributes to the construction of this world. Certain bits of information serve solely to deepen the character itself, others are important for understanding additional aspects, such as other characters, certain events, or laws governing the storyworld. For example, information about a father's violent personality can help explain the disturbed behaviour of his children; his meticulous clothing cannot.
- Realism: viewers expect certain bits of information on the basis of their everyday knowledge and their experiences with reality, and the occurrence of this information in the film serves to make the represented world seem realistic and the story plausible. Thus, the father's meticulous clothing might fit his personality and his place in the social milieu presented in the film.
- Inter- and transtextuality: some information satisfies viewers' expectations regarding the transtextual conventions of groups of media texts, such as genres. The father is a rancher and the film is a Western, so he wears a Stetson and carries a Colt. Other information may refer intertextually to a specific earlier work, for instance, Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic* or John Ford's classic *The Searchers*.

21 See, for example, Pfister 1988: Chapter 5.4.2; Rimmon-Kenan 1996; Nieragden 1995; Jannidis 2000: 2004. In my opinion, attempts to understand 'film as speech', in other words according to the model of spoken language (e.g., Lohmeier 1996), are not overly promising.

22 This list is based on David Bordwell's concept of *motivation* (see Bordwell 1985b: 19ff.). Since I consider some of his terms somewhat unclear, I have chosen different ones. The functions of emotionalisation and meaning have been added.

- **Aesthetics:** character information can possess an intrinsic aesthetic value or direct viewers' attention to the level of representation (self-referentiality). The juxtaposition of the father's hat, Colt, and meticulous black suit may seem strange and noteworthy.
- **Emotionalisation:** information serves to trigger feelings in viewers. The brutal way the rancher beats his children evokes sympathy with them and moral disgust for him.
- **Meaning:** information serves to convey general messages and meanings. After the father was killed by his own children, other ranchers talk about how those who live by the sword die by the sword.

Some bits of character information perform all these functions simultaneously. A dialogue can convey plot-relevant information and depict the character; employ technical terms that contribute to the realism; conform to genre conventions; make intertextual references to another film; steer attention to the narrative process, for example by addressing the audience directly; or stand out because of brilliant ideas and beautiful language, thereby deepening the film's theme. At times, information only performs one function: a character's decision can be indispensable for the plot's development, which is why it is shown despite being unrealistic and implausible, neither fitting the genre nor possessing an aesthetic aspect, and failing to perform any kind of semantic function. Such instances tend, however, to be avoided and 'multi-functional' character information is common.

The functions performed by character information are more or less important in the film, more or less relevant. The information that the father dresses meticulously is less relevant than the information about his violent nature. The relevance of character-related information depends not only on how important or extraordinary it would be in a real-world situation, but also on how strongly it is emphasised in the film, for instance by repetition or a conspicuous form of representation, or by structural relationships, for example that all the film's violent characters dress meticulously and this is meant to be meaningful (cf. Jannidis 2004: 204–05).

Modes of Presenting Character Information

Information about characters not only has various functions and levels of relevance, it is provided to viewers in various ways and produces a variety of effects as a result, above all with regard to the view of the characters and the imaginative closeness to them (see Chapter 13). The differences between the modes of presentation of information relate to the sign system used, its source, its filtration through perceptive instances, its reliability, its claim to truth, and the level of its directness.

Films convey character information through several different sign systems: images, language, music, sound, text, or a combination thereof. The sadness felt by a girl who

has been abandoned can be shown by her facial expression or sad music; the girl can talk about it; we can hear her sobbing or read a letter she has written; and all this can also appear in a single scene. In other words, a film's possibilities go beyond the classic difference between conveying information in linguistic and non-linguistic form (telling and showing) and play a role in how impressive, vivid, and economic characterisation is. Music and images are often more memorable and ambiguous, while words are often more concise and clear. When the same information is conveyed through different channels, this can heighten its effect, or make it seem superfluous or exaggerated.

Both linguistic and non-linguistic information can have various degrees of directness or indirectness: some information—for instance about a character's external appearance—can be understood directly, while other—such as personality traits or complex social relationships—must be inferred. Directness and indirectness are, however, not strictly separated, and instead represent opposite poles of a continuum of obviousness, clarity, comprehensibility, and inferrability.

The (in)directness of character information also depends on its sources or instances on various levels: the characters themselves or other characters, narrators, or filmmakers.²³ These instances differ in terms of their views of the character, their interests, objectivity, and authority. Information is more or less credible depending on whether the characters characterise themselves ('I'm a great guy'), or it is supplied by the character's antagonist ('a complete loser'), a narrator (voice-over: 'Well, he was a little conceited back then, and nobody could stand him'), or the filmmakers (the type of visual depiction, selection of actions, etc. clearly show that the character is, in fact, a big mouth). Characterisation not provided by the characters themselves can be differentiated further: this information can come from other characters through dialogue or in a voice-over spoken by a narrator, and the narrator can belong to the same world as the character (diegetic narrators in *Citizen Kane*) or inhabit a different time and/or story (non-diegetic narrator). The source can also be a first-person narrator like 'Jack' in *Fight Club*, who relates his experiences in retrospect, or a third-person narrator like the chronicler who comments on the rise and fall of the title character in *Barry Lyndon*. Questions of mode, focalisation, and point of view are closely related to the narrative point of view. Character information can be filtered through various perceptual instances.²⁴ For example, we can regard a character's actions from the perspective of a different character—which is possibly distorted—or from an 'objective' point of view, 'from the outside', that has not been assigned to another character.

Such differences in the manner of representation affect the experience and

23 The distinctions have been taken above all from Edward Branigan's narrative model (1992: 100–07; cf. Jannidis 2000: 21; Pfister 1988: 250–64). I do not intend to delve into the wide area of narratology and the contentious relationships between characters and narrators, and instead simply borrow selected elements. In my opinion, the actual filmmakers occupy the uppermost level of the communication model, in other words neither 'the narration' (Bordwell 1985a), nor a 'grand image maker' (Gaudreault and Jost 1999), nor an implicit author (for criticism of this concept, see Kindt and Müller 2006).

24 For more on focalisation, see Margolin 2006; Branigan 1992: 100–07.

assessment of what is perceived, partly because the sources and filters of character information can have varying degrees of *reliability*. In the absence of contradictory evidence, we normally assume that the character information is dependable. Logical, psychological, and value-related contradictions in the information provided by the film or conflicts with our lifeworld knowledge can also make us doubt it. Characters, narrators, and other communicative instances can pursue their own interests, contradict themselves, make problematic assessments, or intentionally mislead the viewers. In *Le Doulos*, we are induced to believe the loyal gangster Silien (Jean-Paul Belmondo) is a police informer and traitor. In *The Usual Suspects*, the apparently harmless small-time criminal and first-person narrator 'Verbal' Kint (Kevin Spacey) is revealed in the end to be a mythical crime boss. Several films by David Lynch, such as *Mulholland Drive*, convey logically contradictory information about their main characters.

The question of reliability is particularly relevant for statements that claim to be true. However, Uri Margolin pointed out that character information can also be conveyed in other modes: it can be counterfactual, conditional, or purely subjective. The inhabitants of Oz in *The Wizard of Oz* are clearly part of Dorothy's dream, thus purely subjective. Characters sometimes use the subjunctive mood when talking about other characters, such as when Captain Renault tells Ilsa that he would be in love with Rick Blaine were he a woman (counterfactual, thus not possible). Rick tells Ilsa that they would be unhappy if she left Victor Laszlo (conditional, thus possible but not factual).

Distribution of Character Information in the Course of the Film

A model proposed by Fotis Jannidis for analysing literary characters is more generally useful for analysing how information about characters is provided also in films and other media.²⁵ His approach mentions seven factors: duration, amount, frequency, order, informational context, and character context. In addition, the relationships between the bits of information can also be considered.

- The duration of information delivery relates to how long characters are represented and described, for example in an image or dialogue. Does a character merely appear briefly in a pan, or does the camera follow them for an extended period? Do other characters discuss them in detail or just mention them? How much of the entire film is devoted to a character?
- Amount refers to the number of items of information that relate to an individual character. This involves the difficulty of deciding at what point bits of information can be differentiated. Does a description of a character as a 'hypochondriac' and then later as 'self-pitying and timid' denote the same characteristic? Is relevant information added when the character is

²⁵ See Jannidis 2000: 19–20; 2004: 220–21.

seen consulting a doctor who wears an annoyed expression? The answer depends, among other things, on how much the representations differ, how detailed descriptions are, the overall comprehensiveness of the character's trait spectrum, and whether the information is relevant to the theme (in which case, more nuanced differences will be registered).

- While duration and amount of information indicate main or secondary characters, the frequency at which information is conveyed is one of the most important indicators of how important this information is, particularly in film as a time-based medium. A widespread rule of thumb is that all important information should be provided at least three times for 'slow Joe in the back row'. What did the villain want again? Oh yes, to destroy the world with a stolen nuclear weapon. Repetition also creates powerful expectations, and variations of repeated information are particularly noticeable; *Groundhog Day* is one film that plays with this strategy.
- The density of information involves the question of whether the various bits of information about a character are conveyed simultaneously, in close succession during a single sequence, or scattered throughout the film, as well as whether information is concentrated at certain points in the text. Exposition in mainstream films often contains compact character portraits with a high density of information, while the protagonists of some independent films reveal their personalities gradually.
- The order in which information is presented plays a central role in characterisation. Information conveyed at the film's beginning or ending is especially important (primacy or recency effect). Contrasts in a character's behaviour—such as the change from loving care to violent anger in the characterisation of McTeague in *Greed*—or developments in a character's personality are shaped by the order in which the information appears. Furthermore, this order plays an important role in creating suspense, surprise, and curiosity about characters. Why are Rick Blaine and Ilsa Lund so tense in *Casablanca*—what kind of relationship did they have in Paris? These questions are not answered until the flashback and Ilsa's explanation give us the information.
- The last two aspects are also related to the informational context of the character information. What other information is it combined with? In addition to information about the environment, events, etc., this involves predominantly information about other characters. What do we learn about Rick, or about Ilsa, and what does that say, for example, about the other character?
- Various items of character information can also be placed in relation to one

another through redundancy, complementarity, or discrepancy.²⁶ Firstly, bits of information can fit with others, meaning they are redundant, such as when we see a character doing something while a second character accurately describes the first's actions. Secondly, information can be *complementary*, which is probably the most common case. We see evidence of a victim's fear, hear the slaving noises made by the monster, and are aware of the reasons for the victim's fear. Thirdly, bits of information can be discrepant, or contradict each other. For example, a character can claim one thing, while their body or behaviour signals the opposite. Such contradictions can be explained in psychological terms (the character is dissembling), or a logical break can be involved. Information is often provided by a variety of sources. One character says something while a second claims the same thing, says something supplementary, or contradicts the first character's statement. Or information inferred from gestures, facial expressions, and clothing is contradictory.

In short, films guide the viewer's experience of characters by conveying information with differing modes of presentation, functions, and degrees of relevance in a structured way. A film's provision of information and the viewers' reception are two dynamic, coupled processes. For viewers, filmic character representation corresponds to the development of the character model. First the basic elements of the model are sketched out, then new information is used to confirm, deepen complete, modify, or reconstruct it. If the film does not divulge any information about the character for a while, the model moves from conscious awareness to long-term memory, and is then recalled when the character reappears in the film. When the film is over, a final character model is stored in long-term memory.

Developments in characters, their changes and transformations (see Chapter 6), depend on this dual process of provision of information by the film and model construction by the viewers, though they are not coincident. The information a film conveys about a character at a certain point in time and the character model constructed on that basis need not necessarily correspond with the character's state in the fictional world at that time. Often, the way the film provides or withholds information about characters' decisive traits or the changes they undergo can be used to trick us. Once again, the example of *Le Doulos*: for quite some time, the film suggests that Silien is a police informant who betrays his friend, though in fact he is profoundly loyal (see also Smith 1995: 218-223). Or *The Fly*: Seth Brundle's metamorphosis into a monster continues inexorably, but in several cases, not until later do we learn the specific way in which his transformation continues. This gradual separation of character and character model is another effect of the informational structures.

26 See Pfister 1988: 73ff. In contrast to Pfister, 'discrepancy' should be understood here as including 'psychologically explicable discrepancy' as well.

To summarise, films employ various strategies of providing information to induce their viewers to develop changing character models and to react with a variety of feelings of sympathy, tension, curiosity, and surprise. In order to understand this structure of character development, it is helpful to analyse systematically how the film presents information. The categories suggested above—together with the reception tendencies described in Chapter 3, Chapter 5, and Chapter 6—can help identify typical patterns of information, explain how traits are attributed and emotional effects evoked, and define decisive phases of characterisation.

Phases of Characterisation

Films provide information in phases of different relevance and density. Certain phases of characterisation bundle relevant bits of information about a character's permanent physical, psychological, or social traits with particular density. Usually, the most important of these phases are the character's introduction and the film's ending. Between them, various further kinds of scenes and sequences contribute to characterisation, such as sequences of typical or socially aberrant behaviour, character-centred subplots, dialogue scenes, flashbacks, subjective sequences, scenes in which decisions are made, scenes of crisis, deception, and disclosure, and scenes of empathy or change.

Of utmost importance is the character's *exposition*, the first bits of information that invoke a preliminary character model.²⁷ With most characters, a significant part of model construction takes place already during the first seconds of the character's representation. What is first learned in these seconds influences the model's whole later development, the viewers' expectations, and their relationship to the character; subsequent changes require time, attention, and narrative effort. Expository information can be conveyed in a variety of ways, such as dialogues (*Pulp Fiction*), action (*Heat*), or mindscapes (*Sweetie*, *Strange Days*). Exposition can be concentrated in one scene or be distributed across the whole film, it can take place at the film's very beginning or be delayed, and it can happen before, during, or after development of the main conflict (Sternberg 1978; Pfister 1988: 125). Moreover, expository information can be reliable or unreliable; if unreliable, the character model will later be revised (such as with Silien in *Le Doulos*). In the case of typified characters, their first appearance is often sufficient to construct a stable character model, while in the case of individualised characters, their traits and social relationships, and sometimes even their body images, usually have to be inferred over an extended period of time and are repeatedly altered and deepened (see Schneider 2000: 150ff.).

27 The concept of exposition refers here to textual elements with an expositional function, and not to the film's beginning (see Hartmann 1995: 106ff.; Eder 1999: 51ff.). For more on the viewer's 'initiation' at the film's beginning, see Hartmann 1995, 2001; Asmuth 1997b: 102ff.

The standard exposition of protagonists as set out in screenwriting guides is a reliable introduction through the characters' external appearance and action at the beginning of the film in a kind of portrait. Similar to dramas, films often begin with a 'three-step introduction comprising the dramatic prelude, the actual exposition, and an "inciting incident"' (Asmuth 1997b: 106):²⁸ The protagonist is first shown in action, then introduced in more detail, and subsequently their main conflict is developed. In this way, the viewer is given orientation, has clear expectations of certain actions, and is in suspense concerning the characters' future. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the drifter, Frank (Jack Nicholson), is immediately depicted as being greedy, wily, egotistical, and morally questionable, since he misuses a helpful driver to cheat a motel owner. This characterisation is, however, enriched by Nicholson's star image as a likeable, anti-conventional figure with rather positive traits. Typical, often genre-specific exposition patterns are frequently employed for both protagonists and antagonists. For example, the appearance and motivation of monsters or murderers in horror films are often not depicted in detail until near the ending. In *Halloween*, the murderer wears a mask; in *The Relic*, we at first see no more than individual body parts and the monster's evil deeds. Instead of a more concrete character model, the mental representations remain vague, allowing each viewer to project their personal fears onto the character.

In other cases, higher narrative instances can explicitly define the main characters' personalities. *Greed* begins with a sequence of this type: a beefy man pushes a wagon from a gold mine, takes care of an injured bird, and shows it to another gold miner. When the other man laughs and knocks it from his hand, the first miner angrily pushes him off a bridge. With the words 'Such was McTeague', the insert following this scene establishes sentimentality and violent anger as his defining and invariable personality traits. In other films, omniscient voice-overs serve to set up and define characters, e.g., in *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain/Amélie*, in which the main character and her parents are introduced and commented on in brief scenes showing their likes and dislikes.

In other films, again, the protagonist is introduced somewhat later in the story or by means of a characterisation in absentia in order to make the viewers curious, as in the beginning of *Casablanca*. The environment or commentary by others provide clues, and while the character is not shown, he or she represents the focus of interest as a 'structuring absence'. Exposition may withhold essential information about the character, cause ambiguity through contradictory evidence, or spread the exposition out throughout the film. Polanski's *Death and the Maiden* keeps viewers uncertain until the ending as to whether protagonist, Paulina, is correct in believing that her husband's guest was the man who tortured her (see Chapter 16). Finally, some films, such as *Der Totmacher/Deathmaker*, aim at a continuous character study, so the character model

28 Also called the hook, portrait, or point of attack in film; see Eder 1999: 51–66.

cannot be complete until the film's ending, since our understanding of the character keeps developing (and in some cases remains incomplete even then).

After exposition, further information is conveyed so that the character model goes on developing and changing. In the case of protagonists in mainstream films, this often involves several turning points in the plot (plot points) where the characters make crucial decisions, undergo decisive developments, or we learn something new about them. Further types of sequences are also often important in characterisation. Scenes of 'typical behaviour' show habitual behaviour patterns, often by means of repetition. For example, the neurotic personality of the protagonist, Udall (Jack Nicholson), in *As Good as It Gets* is clearly shown when he is always careful to avoid stepping on cracks in the sidewalk and always switches lights on and off a certain number of times. In this case, the character's behaviour is not only typical, it also deviates from social norms and values (the significance of aberrant behaviour for character assessment was mentioned in Chapter 5). In scenes of behavioural deviation, violations of social norms and viewer expectations are embedded in the viewer's memory, even when related in an apparently casual fashion, such as in a scene from Takeshi Kitano's *Hana-bi*: the protagonist, Nishi (Kitano), watches a group of adolescents playing baseball. When the ball lands at his feet, he at first feigns throwing it back, then tosses it away while his expressionless face remains directed at the baseball players.

Key scenes of action and decision-making, which show characters in action and under pressure to make decisions, reveal the core of their character. For example, a number of Steven Spielberg's man-in-the-street heroes (e.g., in *Duel*) demonstrate what they are capable of, while the anti-heroes' unscrupulous opportunism in *Swimming with Sharks* and *Das Spinnennetz/Spider's Web* culminate in them killing their lovers to advance their career. Such scenes are often placed at a film's turning points or climax (Eder 1999: 91ff., 104ff.). In many cases, they are also scenes of change anticipated by existential crises: the character has failed to reach his or her objective, is embroiled in a crisis, and must do some soul-searching before adapting to it and finding a new strategy. Such moments can also coincide with scenes of empathy that employ various representational techniques to induce viewers to feel empathy for the character and understand him or her better (Plantinga 1999; see Chapter 13). Dream and nightmare sequences can also make a character's feelings, wishes, and fears especially clear.

Jumps in the plot's timeline, analepses and prolepses, are often employed to convey important information about characters. For example, flashbacks, such as those in *Casablanca* and *The Silence of the Lambs*, relate central events from the character's past history, thus explaining motives, wishes, or traumas. Often, enigmas and mysteries woven around the character are cleared up this way. Some characters are themselves trying to find out about their own backstory, and then it unfolds, such as in stories about amnesia. That can be as shocking as in *Angel Heart*, where at the ending the hero discovers that he is a murderer. The future floods over others in a flashforward, such as with the secondary characters Lola runs into in *Lola rennt/Run Lola Run*.

Often, dialogue scenes are used to convey information in condensed, abstract, or elaborated and explicit form, to generalise about a character's traits, reflect, or depict conflicts. The rather sparse dialogue in action films often explains past histories, conflicts, and characters' personality traits in concentrated form. In *Heat*, for example, the conversations between the police officer (Al Pacino) and his wife, and later with his antagonist (Robert de Niro), are central for characterising the characters. In *Casablanca*, the dialogues that take place before Rick's first appearance serve to depict him. In addition to the core phases of the main plot line, subplots and digressions also serve to make characterisation more detailed when they focus on a character.

The film's ending is particularly important, being the part where protagonists achieve their objectives or undergo final transformations. For example, a small-time criminal is revealed to be a legendary gangster (*The Usual Suspects*). Viewers complete their character models and perform a final affective assessment of the character, and the recency effect prolongs the effects of both. The conclusion entails a farewell to the main characters, and some films end with their final downfall (*Eraserhead*, *Macbeth*). More common are conventional conclusions such as the kiss in the final scenes of romantic comedies, the cowboy riding off into the sunset in Westerns (*Shane*), and cliff-hangers in serials. The final image of the character can trigger additional thoughts or suggest that life will go on (*Les 400 coups*/*The 400 Blows*).

To conclude, a few preliminary results on the character as an artefact can be summarised: the use of various forms of audiovisual representation lend characters a specific sensory nature and experiential quality. The way in which a film provides information about a character plays a central role in this and ensures a character-related dramatic structure of tension, curiosity, and surprise. The variety of categories that can be used to describe the audiovisual representation and the provision of information poses the question of how the abundance of individual aspects can be dealt with and analysis can be focused on the most important of them. One option is to select particularly relevant scenes or phases of characterisation. Another way to focus analysis—orientation toward general artefact traits—will be developed in the following chapter. In conclusion, the results from both chapters will be summarised in context and illustrated, using *Casablanca* as an example.

7.3 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions about Character Construction

1. How are cinematic (or other media-specific) means and techniques used to construct the character; which forms and degrees of sensory presence and aesthetic experience do they give the character?

- Does the use of film form tend to be inconspicuous and steer attention toward the character as a represented being, or is it conspicuous, guiding the viewers' attention to the manner of representation itself and the character as an artefact?

- What media and storytelling contexts is the character embedded in? What influence do the medium's conventions and genres, as well as the film's overall dramatic structure have?
- What are the connotations of the character's name; what are its origins; what does it sound like; how is it articulated? What associations does it have? Did the character choose his or her own name? Are there intertextual references?
- Which actor plays the character? Do the role and actor fit, or are there discrepancies? Is the actor a star? How does the actor's image influence the character model? How does it relate to other characterisation techniques (correspondence, contradictions, selective use)? Is one character played by several different actors? Does one actor play different characters in the same film? With what effect?
- How can the performance and acting style be described? Does the acting style conform to any established conventions (e.g., repertory, Method, etc.)? Is it more 'realistic' and narratively integrated, or stylised, artificial, independent, ostentatious, role-distant? How does this affect the character model?
- How is the character presented through the film's audiovisual style? What are the roles played by the devices of camera, lighting, music, make-up, staging, editing, etc.? Do these means emphasise the characters' relationships with certain things; do they express subjective states or perspectives; do they comment on the character?
- How can the basis of the viewers' sensual aesthetic experience of the characters in sound and image be described? How are the characters presented concerning their spatial plasticity and organisation, their shapes and contours, their visual composition of brightness and colours, their movements and rhythms? How does all that put individual characters in relation to other characters and the environment? What kinds of sounds are associated with the character? How can their volume, frequency (highs and lows), materiality, spatial location, temporal development, and rhythm be described?
- How do the various aspects of the character's visual and acoustic appearance interact? Which stand out because of their intensity? Are these aspects similar or do they contrast? Is their relation harmonious or disharmonious? Do they comprise a whole or have dissociated effects? How does this interplay develop in the course of the film?

2. How does the film (or other media text) convey information about the character, and what does this lead to in terms of the dramatic structure of the character model's development?

- Which media-specific means and sign systems are used most to characterise the character, external features, dialogue, or action? How are these means employed; how do they interact?
 - Which strategies for conveying information can be observed in the film? What patterns of character-related information unfold concerning the duration, amount, frequency, density, order, and contextualisation of this information? What effects of such patterns can be identified?
 - Which communication instances are used to provide information about characters? The character itself, other characters, narrators inside or outside the represented world? What kind of authority do these communication instances possess?
 - What do other characters say about the character? Are their statements correct? Do they talk with, or about the character, in their presence or absence? Are there voice-over commentary or text inserts that communicate something about the character?
 - How reliable is the information? Which items of information can be recognised directly, and which must be inferred at a later point in time? Which items of information are redundant, complementary, or discrepant?
3. Which phases of characterisation does the character go through? Which of the film's scenes and sequences make essential contributions to characterisation?
- When and how is the character introduced, in a condensed block of information or gradually and successively? What do we learn about them first? Is the information presented at its introduction reliable? Is the character characterised in absentia? What is the initial impression?
 - Are there flashbacks, digressions, dream sequences, dialogue scenes that characterise the character, key scenes and plot points, scenes of action, change or decision-making, or those showing typical and/or aberrant behaviour?
 - Are there phases of characterisation during which contradictions arise?
 - What kind of impression does the character make at the film's ending; which elements of the preceding characterisation have or have not been confirmed? Do motifs from the beginning reappear?

8. Characters as Artefacts: Aesthetic Qualities and Conventions

8.1 Dimensions of Characters as Artefacts: Realism, Stereotypicality, Complexity, and Other Contested Qualities

The previous chapter looked at the way in which characters are constructed in the film through representational techniques and strategies of information distribution, and how this gives them a particular sensory form and narrative dynamic in the viewers' experience. This chapter is now concerned with some crucial results of this cinematic representation, namely the general properties of characters as constructs or artefacts, as something made. This is not as abstract as it sounds. In analysis and criticism, it is often claimed that certain characters are 'realistic', 'multidimensional', or 'stereotypical'. Three fields of discourse are especially important here: (1) In *creators' discourses* on filmmaking, countless guidelines and books offer advice on, for instance, *How to Write Realistic Characters* (Chase 2015), and corresponding conventions shape many film practices. (2) Reviews often make *aesthetic evaluations* of characters; for example, the animation film *Up* is recommended as 'another masterwork from Pixar' not least because the characters are assessed as 'believable' and 'realistic' (Ebert 2009), or the gangster thriller *Blood Brother* is panned because 'the movie's promise collapses under the weight of inconsistent characters' (Dujsik 2018). (3) Often, film reviews also enter the field of *sociocultural criticism*, explaining, for instance, 'How *Moonlight* Questions Society's Stereotypes', as its characters challenge 'outmoded notions of black and masculine identity' (Sehgal 2019). Some institutions do not only critically examine current practices of representation in film and television, but also publish guidelines in order to change them. For example, the Center for Scholars and Storytellers, associated with the UCLA, reports on the 'Authentically Inclusive Representation (AIR) of Race' (n.d.) and advises to 'avoid stereotypes by portraying characters of color with rich, intersectional identities' and to 'include counter-stereotypical, multi-dimensional characters'.

All three discourse strands—as well as any discussions of non-professional viewers after watching a movie—regularly attribute to characters certain qualities as artefacts or creative constructs. These *artefact qualities* (*Artefaktqualitäten*) are to

be clearly distinguished from the diegetic (or fictional) traits that the portrayed beings possess in the areas of physicality, psyche, sociality, and behaviour (see Part II and Part III). Characters in a fictional world could attribute the latter traits to each other, e.g., they could say that Rick Blaine has dark hair, is cynical, and loves Ilsa Lund. In the case of artefact qualities, however, this is not possible; it would sound strange if Ilsa referred to Rick as 'multidimensional'. In this chapter we will explore such qualities that we can ascribe to characters as communicative artefacts when we look at them from an analytic meta-perspective, calling them 'realistic', 'consistent', 'one-dimensional', 'stereotypical', or 'static'. Such attributions are used quite naturally in discussions by viewers, critics, or filmmakers, but at the same time, they are often quite controversial, and the criteria for determining whether a character is indeed multidimensional or realistic are often not very clear. The reception-oriented approach developed earlier offers possibilities for clarification and explanation here. We can start from the observation that viewers are prompted by the film to develop mental character models representing the system of traits of the beings portrayed, such as that of a man named Rick with dark hair and certain conflicts. These traits are represented in a character model in a structured arrangement, a system. This system of diegetic representations, again, forms the basis for ascribing corresponding artefact qualities. It can be analysed on a meta-level at least in the following respects:

1. Amount and level of detail: the represented trait system is more or less comprehensive, substantial, and elaborated.
2. Selectivity, dimensionality, and focus: certain characteristics are emphasised in the character model while others are excluded or marginalised.
3. Coherence and consistency: the traits are more or less closely related and correspond to or contradict one another.
4. Typification and individualisation: the trait constellation can conform to a greater or lesser degree to social stereotypes or narrative prototypes known by the viewers.
5. Simplicity and complexity: a character with a small number of consistent traits conforming to a particular type seems simple, while the complexity of characters increases with the degree of detail, deviation from type, or conflictual relations between traits.
6. Modality, mediality, and perspectivity: the traits are represented in various perspectives and modes, as more or less based on sensual perceptions, concrete, or abstract.
7. Realism and artificiality: the viewers assess the character model according to some criteria of reality, and it can conform to them to a greater or lesser degree.

8. Contextualisation and development: character models are integrated into other mental representations, such as contexts in the storyworld (character constellation, plot, narrating instances), but also on the thematic and communicative level. Furthermore, the represented trait system changes over time.

All these structural characteristics of character models affect viewer reactions not only on the diegetic level. We do not confuse characters with real-life beings but experience them partly as media constructs. At times at least, we are aware of the fact that filmmakers intentionally shape them by means of representational techniques and strategies and that we can fall back on media-specific knowledge in order to understand them. In an analysis, we can ask about their effects, relate these to the manner of their construction and their qualities as artefacts, and assess them accordingly. Certain artefact qualities feed into objectives, norms and conventions of film production: for example, protagonists of 'classical' mainstream films should be realistic and individualised, whereas they should not be static or inconsistent. Such combinations of certain artefact qualities can be examined as general *character conceptions* (*Figurenkonzeptionen*; see below), which are typical or normative for certain kinds of films.

Several film and literary scholars have already examined the qualities of characters as artefacts, though using different terms.¹ The following sections compile and connect their thoughts, augment them, and substantiate them in terms of reception psychology. The artefact qualities are here discussed in pairs of opposites, and the two most important pairs, concerning typified/individualised and realistic/non-realistic characters, will be dealt with first and in greater detail. Then, additional pairs of qualities will be introduced in shorter form: complex/simple, coherent/incoherent, dynamic/static, transparent/opaque, uniform/open, whole/fragmented, flat/round, one-dimensional/multidimensional, 'literal'/symbolic, and psychological/transpsychological. The objective is to understand more precisely what is meant by these artefact qualities and how they come to be. This will also show how they are linked to certain production standards and evaluation criteria.

Typification and Individualisation

In Chapter 5, two opposite forms of character model development were presented, typification and individualisation.² Viewers develop *typified* character models when the film's information activates and largely corresponds to a specific mental prototype, category, or schema in their memory, e.g., a mental representation of what a 'typical'

1 Most importantly, see Hochman 1985: 86–140; in addition, cf. Forster 1927; Tomasi 1988: 45–51; Pfister 1988: 240–50; Smith 1995: 116–18.

2 Building on Schneider 2000; Culpeper 2000; Koch 1991: 139, 284–85; Dyer 1993: 11ff.

'mother', 'Latina', 'artist', or 'Hollywood heroine' is like. Viewers develop *individualised* character models when the film's information does not fit such prototypes and must be made sense of gradually instead. Whether characters are typified or individualised influences how they are further perceived and assessed.

As character types are mentally represented in collective memory and semiotically in the media, the principle of typification entails 'seeing little and knowing a lot'. Just a small amount of information need be communicated explicitly, and on this basis many further aspects can be inferred easily. Just a few of the character's features are seen and a great deal more is then added mentally to form strong and reliable hypotheses about their personality, sociality, and behaviour, as well as about the connected narrative. When Tom Mix or another white-hatted cowboy appeared in a classic Western from the early twentieth century, most viewers of the time could assume that he had strong morals, lived a lonely life, knew how to handle a revolver, and would win in the end. Because typified characters are so easily understood and quickly established, they enable swift, economical storytelling.

In contrast, an individualised character such as Charles Foster Kane does not conform to a certain mental prototype, but rather to the general conception of the human individual as possessing a unique, varied, ultimately unfathomable constellation of physical, psychological, and social traits (Pfister 1988: 245). For filmmakers and viewers, individualised characters require more time and attention. A greater amount of cognitive effort must be made to understand their personality and social life; empathy is often necessary, which can deepen the affective involvement.

Typification and individualisation are not strictly separated, but rather poles of a continuum. As character types consist of recurrent trait constellations, generalised systems of diegetic traits and/or textual qualities, the degree to which a character is typified depends on the extent to which its trait constellation corresponds to the mental or medial prototype.³ You can easily take any type and deconstruct it by introducing further information that does not fit into the mental schema. A dark-haired Frenchman who wears a beret, carries a baguette under his arm and is a charmer and gourmet might be considered extremely 'typical' until the film shows him to be a trans man whose native tongue is Polish.

Two common opinions about character types are wrong: firstly, that they are simple and always comprise just a few traits, and secondly, that they are static and never change in the course of a story.⁴ Actually, a typified character's trait system can be quite complex and its representation extremely nuanced (see Seger 1990: 135), for example

3 Thus, the expression 'type' can denote several different things. On the one hand, it can refer to a general idea of a certain trait constellation that is stored in the viewer's memory. On the other hand, it can refer to an individual character that conforms to this trait constellation. Some things that are called 'types' are quite different from how the term is used in this book. For example, when Umberto Eco speaks of a 'type' and the 'typical literary person', he means something that will be addressed later in this book as 'symbolic/exemplifying characters' (cf. Eco 1984a).

4 E.g., this view is espoused in Dyer 1993: 12ff.

in Molière's 'imaginary invalid' Argan. Not simplicity but a high degree of conformity of key traits with an existing mental or semiotic schema is decisive for typification. While the Black nanny and housekeeper in *Imitation of Life*, Annie, is represented in no less detail than the other characters, her typification is more extensive because she conforms to the stereotype of the Black 'mammy' (Bogle 2004) for the most part. Furthermore, typified characters may very well change; the nature of their change has only to be familiar from other narratives. In many television dramas, 'typical' career women are overcome by the sudden realisation that marriage and being a stay-at-home mother and housewife is the best solution for them, which represents a radical transformation in values and character. Typical characters thus do not exhibit an absence of changes; they exhibit *typical* changes.

Types differ in many regards, such as their range of included traits, their origins, their development, their relations to concrete lifeworld experience and their affirmation or subversion of societal norms and values. On the most general level, the following kinds of types can be distinguished:

- Social types (e.g., of managers or mothers) are regularly applied in everyday life and refer to the viewers' social reality; characters are categorised as members of social *groups*, holders of social roles, or people with a certain physicality and personality (see Chapter 5).
- In contrast, media types (the Westerner, the manic pixie dream girl) are predominantly formed through media and their genres, narrative traditions, or star systems.
- There are different kinds of media types: *content-based* types are distinguished by their specific constellation of physical, mental, and social traits, whereas *structural types*, e.g., heroes and antagonists, are determined by their position and function within the character constellation and narrative (see Chapter 9 and Chapter 10).⁵ *Functional types* are a subset of structural types: characters that are intentionally typified for the purpose of better fulfilling functions in the narrative or dramatic structure.

These kinds of types can overlap and are interrelated in the collective imaginary and cultural memory. One and the same character can conform to different kinds of types simultaneously; for example, a typical gangster can also be a typical protagonist. Moreover, all those types can play a role in understanding individualised characters, which however cannot be reduced to one (or a limited set) of them. To understand Rick Blaine, viewers can use several social types: he is a casino owner, an employer, an American, an expatriate, an outcast, a lover, a cynic, a sentimentalist, and a tough guy. Moreover, the role and Humphrey Bogart's star image call various media types to mind:

⁵ In line with Tzvetan Todorov's ideas, Thomas Koch speaks of substantial and formal types (1991: 139).

Rick is the protagonist, the hero, and resembles media gangsters, Westerners, and spies in other films. These types exercise some influence on how viewers understand Rick; however, his traits fail to match any one single type completely, going beyond them all.

Types are dealt with in a wide variety of scientific disciplines, particularly in psychoanalysis, genre theory, and the social psychology of stereotypes, groups and roles. They all develop more nuanced typologies which in turn may influence media practices; for instance, a screenwriting manual claims that 'being familiar with the [psychological] theories [of personality types] can be helpful in differentiating your characters and strengthening character conflicts' (Seger 1990: 76). In film there are various ways in which types are employed: stars like Humphrey Bogart often play familiar or ideal social types and individualise them through their special characteristics, thereby creating specific relationships between type, star image, and film-specific acting (Dyer 1999: 99–100). Through the star, a type can be symbolically stylised, individually varied and modified, countered, or refracted. Other actors, especially for minor roles, are often chosen on the basis of their appearance, for the purpose of representing social groups and suggesting how they should be assessed (for example, the honest workers versus the decadent bourgeoisie in Sergei Eisenstein's films). Béla Balázs supported this praxis of typecasting as early as 1924 (2001: 37–43). However, films may also criticise ideological traditions by exaggerating or inverting certain types, thereby putting their constructed nature on display. This frequently happens in comedies or postmodern films; in Season 7, Episode 12 of *The Simpsons*, a bowling team is explicitly called 'The Stereotypes'. But even in many cases of their critical use, types are not only caricatured, but at the same time repeated and therefore strengthened.

With typified characters in film and other media, a further distinction must be made between *stereotypes*, *archetypes*, and *functional types*. The latter term designates characters that are intentionally set up as types in order to fulfil certain functions in the film and its narrative. Typified characters are understood easier and faster, making their detailed establishment and development unnecessary. This again allows for increasing the narrative pace and scope, which is useful not only in plot-oriented stories with a great deal of action, attractions, and spectacles (*Conan the Barbarian*), but also in conveying the complex social worlds and large ensembles of certain series (*The Expanse*). In comedies, character types are used to achieve comical effects; they are exaggerated, varied in surprising ways or placed in unusual contexts (e.g., the secret-agent schema in the *Austin Powers* films). More generally, typification is also used for countless secondary characters that are not intended to attract much attention.

In the literature on screenwriting, characters that perform certain functions relating to the plot and viewers' emotions are frequently termed *archetypes*, with reference to Jung's theory of archetypes and the collective unconscious. Archetypes are considered to be universally understandable and emotionally effective. The influential Hollywood script-development executive Christopher Vogler lists seven such archetypes, which

include the 'hero', 'shadow', 'mentor', and 'threshold guardian' (Vogler 1992: 33ff.). Strictly speaking, however, these are not specific character types with certain trait constellations, but rather functions in the plot, several of which can be combined in a single character. For this reason, I will distinguish them from archetypes proper by calling them *functional roles* (see Chapter 10) and defining the term 'archetype' more specifically as a character type with a trait constellation that is common across history and cultures (see also Volkmann 1998: 21).

In contrast to archetypes with their positive connotations, *stereotypes* are normally regarded negatively, are more group-specific, and vary across history and sociocultural environments.⁶ The term can refer to several different matters. (1) In a first, broad meaning, stereotyping refers to an aesthetically negative form of typification as producing noticeably schematic characters that correspond to familiar mental and semiotic types to such a degree that they seem worn out. In this sense, a stereotype is simply a cliché or a functional media type. (2) In a second, more specific sense, a stereotype is a character that corresponds to social stereotypes. In the terminology of social psychology, a stereotype represents a 'subjectively expected correlation between traits and group membership'.⁷ While this usage treats the stereotype neutrally as a cognitive unit, more often it is considered negatively: (3) According to Noël Carroll, cognitive units are 'ideological' when they are epistemically faulty and contribute to a praxis of social domination (1998a: 378ff.). More specifically, stereotypes can be understood as overgeneralising mental or semiotic schemata of a particular social group, which rigidly associate members of that group with certain traits merely based on their membership in that group, thereby distorting reality and influencing the distribution of social power.⁸

I employ the term 'stereotype' in this third sense, as an 'ideological social schema' (or a character that conforms to such a schema; see Chapter 5). Stereotypes are normatively and affectively charged, serve social interests, and are always stereotypes *for someone*, i.e., positioned within a sociocultural context. They arise within a social in-group that the individual belongs to, in reference to this group (autostereotype) or to out-groups one dissociates oneself from (heterostereotype). The effectiveness of stereotypes depends on the fact that they rest on a tacit agreement: 'That's what we all believe about everyone in that group'. Differences between members of a group are minimised, while differences between groups are maximised. Positive characteristics tend to be attributed to the in-group, while negative characteristics tend to be attributed to out-groups. In a certain group or culture, stereotypes influence a majority of opinions about others, but one culture's familiar stereotypes can be considered

6 On stereotypes in film, see Berg 2002; Benshoff and Griffin 2004; Schweinitz 2010, 2011; Brylla 2018. For a bibliographical overview of earlier works on filmic stereotypes, see Manchel 1990: 435–555.

7 Stroebe, Hewstone, and Stephenson 1996: 162; see also Culpeper 2000.

8 The following builds on Schönplüg 1998; Berg 2002; Bar-Tal and Teichman 2005; Brylla 2018; also, Ganter 1997: 6 and Dyer 1993: 11ff.

strange, objectionable, or exotic constructs in a different culture.

Stereotypes can be criticised in different respects: firstly aesthetically, because they fail to perform one of the essential tasks of art: artistic innovation and *ostranenie* ('defamiliarisation' as understood in Russian formalism), or liberating the perception of reality from the accustomed routine and intensifying it. Secondly, stereotypes are trivial and fail to provide additional knowledge or experience. For this reason, they are criticised in terms of their effect on viewers because they tend to cause boredom. Thirdly and crucially, stereotypes are criticised from a sociocultural perspective, because they spread and reinforce unreasonable thought patterns with anti-social and discriminatory consequences. Many stereotypes have problematic effects on the assessment of and affective attitude toward social groups, for example, systematic distortions of judgement, as stereotyped persons are judged in a biased, reductive, more extreme and often negative fashion.

Stereotyping in US and European film and television has already been investigated in numerous studies in the fields of media sociology, communication science, and cultural studies, above all with regard to gender, sexual orientation, nationality, race, and class.⁹ Social minorities or groups with lower levels of power in a society—but also some powerful elites such as bankers, lawyers, or politicians are stereotyped in many mainstream films, or even their majority.

Institutions such as the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media or the German MaLisa Foundation monitor the field of gender representations and publish regular reports showing again and again, for instance, that women in American and European films are generally underrepresented and more likely shown as young, thin, sexualised, and in a domestic rather than professional context. In quantitative studies, stereotypical sex and gender roles are identified by means such as the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem 1974, see also Schiappa 2008: 17): stereotypically, women are supposed to be sensitive to the needs of others, yielding, sympathetic, childlike, gullible, gentle, affectionate, compassionate, shy, and tender, whereas men are supposed to be independent, assertive, forceful, able leaders, dominant, aggressive, analytical, competitive, ambitious, and individualistic. Films and other visual media often express such stereotypical traits through showing women as working in subordinate professions or functions, fulfilling roles as mothers or daughters in a family, being smaller, appearing more often scantily clad, taking subordinate or unstable bodily postures (sitting, lying; standing with knees crossed), using the 'feminine touch' (caressing one's own face or body), or showing withdrawal or loss of control (strong expressions of emotions) (Döring 2022).

While such social-scientific findings concern very different types of male or female roles and characters, critical studies in film analysis and history have elaborated more medium-specific 'stereotypologies', which distinguish between certain dominant kinds

9 For example, Fiske 1997; Hall 2004; Holtzman and Sharpe 2014.

of character stereotypes in film. For example, Molly Haskell (1987) sees women in US cinema stereotyped as 'love goddesses, mothers, martyrs, spinsters, broads, virgins, vamps, prudes, adventuresses, she-devils, and sex kittens'. The most comprehensive analyses focus on ethnic groups in Hollywood cinema:

- Donald Bogle (2004) describes five stereotypes of African Americans: the Uncle Tom, the Mammy, the amusing Coon, the tragic Mulatto woman, and the oversexed brutal Buck.
- Charles Ramírez Berg (2002) distinguishes five Latino stereotypes: the Bandido or Greaser, the Latin Lover, the Male Buffoon, the Female Clown, and the Dark Lady.
- Jack Shaheen (2001) lists several Arab stereotypes: villains and terrorists, sheikhs, repressed women and harem concubines, ancient Egyptians, and Palestinians.
- Omer Bartov (2005) finds four general dimensions of stereotyping Jews in the cinema: as perpetrator (in Nazi and other antisemitic films), as victim (in films about persecution and the Holocaust), as hero (in films about Jewish resistance and the founding of Israel), and as anti-hero (in films about conflicts between Israelis and Arabs).



Fig. 29 A negative stereotype about Latinos that was common in Hollywood movies for a long time was the evil and stupid 'Bandido' or 'Greaser'; here in *The Gunfighter*. (Dir. Henry King, *The Gunfighter*, 1950, 20th Century Fox, USA. All rights reserved.)

The character models that correspond to these stereotypes link certain physical, psychological, and social traits and behaviours—mostly considered negative or strange—to the central characteristic of group membership. At the same time, such typologies demonstrate the intersectional character of most stereotypes. Ascription of membership in groups defined by ethnicity intersects with other categories such as gender, age, nationality, or class, often with a focus on personality traits. This concerns also other groups, for instance, when Asians are stereotyped as either wise and ambitious or shady and deceitful, Native Americans appear as either noble or bloodthirsty, or disabled people either as tragic, helpless victims or overachieving ‘supercrips’ (Brylla 2018). Stereotypical characters are also closely connected with plot patterns and genres (Dyer 1993: 15); the ‘damsel in distress’ has to be rescued, while the ‘manic pixie dream girl’ must free the male hero from his brooding loneliness. How stereotypical characters are positioned in character constellations and narrative conflicts will be dealt with in Chapter 10. For now, it suffices to say that they appear mostly as secondary characters or antagonists.

Character stereotypes can also be consciously disrupted or countered. For instance, a character may be constructed as a stereotype, but then perform a different function in the narrative, thus putting the assumptions of the stereotype into question: a stereotypical alcoholic may become a successful businessman, a ‘damsel in distress’ may develop into an active heroine.

Beyond stereotypes, other social types can also suggest a rejection of dominant norms, such as characters that do not belong to dominant groups or society at large (see Dyer 1999: 52ff.). However, their general critical potential is often defused. In many stories about rebels, their rebellion is associated with youth undergoing a passing phase (*Rebel Without a Cause*, *The Wild One*). The type of the ‘independent woman’ is oppositional in a more concealed manner. Even if at the ending of many films, capable, intelligent, and independent women are often punished, ‘tamed’, and integrated into traditional structures, their strength and independence may still be admired by the viewers (Dyer 1999: 57).

The various kinds of typification and their relations can be summed up in a schema (Diagram 16). We must leave it here with that and refer to more comprehensive work on the complex field (Schweinitz 2011; Brylla 2023). However, one crucial difference of my approach to typification to some others must be stressed in conclusion. Jörg Schweinitz, for instance, rigidly separates ‘narrative stereotypes’ in the media from ‘socio-psychological stereotypes’ as ‘normalized perceptions of the “Other”’ (2010: 283), claiming that both operate according to their own, distinct logic. While I agree that it is important to differentiate between those concepts and logics, I’m convinced it is even more important to also model the close interconnections between the two. Fictional worlds and everyday life, imagination and everyday experience, narratives in the media and in our minds, might influence each other much more than some think (see Chapter 12).

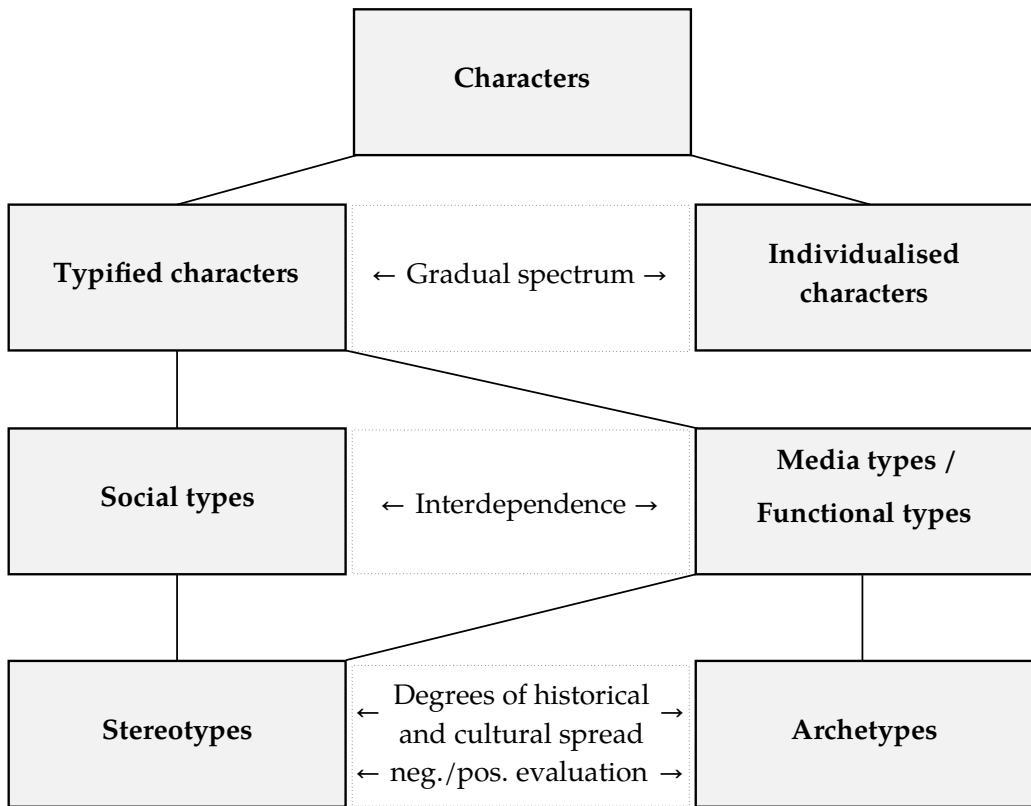


Diagram 16 Kinds of typification and their relationships

Realism and Deviations from It

'To make a faithful picture, come as close as possible to copying the object just as it is.' This simple-minded injunction baffles me; for the object before me is a man, a swarm of atoms, a complex of cells, a fiddler, a friend, a fool, and much more. If none of these constitute the object as it is, what else might? If all are ways the object is, then none is the way the object is. I cannot copy all these at once; and the more nearly I succeed, the less would the result be a realistic picture. (Goodman 1976: 6f.)

Realistic characters are considered to be the normal or ideal case for fiction films. Terms such as 'alienation', 'stylisation', and 'idealisation' refer to the purposeful reworking of the realistic standard, in other words deviations. John Ellis lists three criteria for realistic representation: plausibility, precision in the representation of the narrative world (wardrobe, setting, props, etc.), and coherence, which is normally ensured by a causal motivation of events.¹⁰ Characteristics of realism are 'internal psychosocial and historical consistency', 'minor contingent details', and 'the character's opacity' (Koch

¹⁰ See Ellis 1982: 7ff.; criticism of his views can be found in Carroll 1988: 148ff.

1991: 172). The films of Ken Loach or Italian Neorealism, for example, are considered realistic in this sense. The criteria named above can be deepened, augmented, and made to refer to the character.

Extended debates about the concept of realism have led to a consensus of not regarding fictional realism as merely correspondence between what is represented and an objective reality. Firstly, reality itself is in a certain regard a product of construction,¹¹ and secondly, very different forms of representation have been considered realistic in the course of media history; in other words, the conception of realism is historically variable. For this reason, an encyclopaedia of cultural theory comes to the following conclusion: 'Realism could [...] best be comprehended as a historically and sociologically variable realism effect created when [...] an artwork conforms to the audience's conception of reality and possibly even plays a role in determining it' (Herman 1998: 451–52). This 'reality effect' or '*effet de réel*' (Roland Barthes) arises when texts employ aesthetic devices to evoke 'the impression of marked realism and truth to reality in the fictional world' (Reckwitz 1998: 453). The stylistic characteristics through which this effect is created vary across history and cultures.

However, they are not arbitrary. While realism is an effect of media texts that depends on conventions, it is also created through mimesis and is connected to reality.¹² A more or less close mimetic relationship between fiction and reality results from the fact that a great deal of the same mental dispositions employed during character reception also come into play when dealing with real persons. Their similarities and differences range from the level of sensory perception to felt structural or affective correspondences to the conscious assessment of a character's physical, mental, and social traits and the awareness of certain artefact qualities. On the level of perception, for instance, the film's sounds and images can to a greater or lesser degree conform to or differ from preconscious, implicit criteria of realism involved in the psychology of perception, concerning, for instance, shapes, textures, colours, or movements (see Grodal 1999)—think of the 'uncanny valley effect' in computer animation. In the same way as fictional narratives, human experience also develops over time and possesses an implicit narrative structure. In lifeworld experience, in plans and memories, attention already focuses on certain experiences while excluding others. Furthermore, realistic characters conform to the person schema and expectations of reality on higher levels of information processing, such as expectations regarding physical or psychological abilities or social behaviour. Other structural characteristics of the character model such as typification, simplicity, incoherence, inconsistency, a low level of detail, or conspicuous violations of modality can also make the character seem less realistic and more artificial, as well as the increased need of turning to media knowledge during character synthesis.

11 See Berger and Luckmann 1974; Searle 1995.

12 See Smith 1995: 31ff.; and the preceding chapters on character reception and synthesis.

Thus, realism is always perceived or felt realism. A fictional text must above all be plausible to seem realistic, and it must agree with a number of assumptions about reality, not necessarily with reality itself. A realistic character's system of physical, mental, and social traits matches common conceptions of humanity, folk theories, and opinions of the relevant viewer group about the kind of person involved—baker, secret agent, or queen. The main factor is *vraisemblance*, plausible combinations of a character's traits, motives, and conduct. Key to the phenomenon of realism is recognition: of a viewer's personal experiences, observations, and feelings. At a higher level, a realistic representation of feelings can also be based on certain forms of stylisation or alienation, which grasp or suggest experiences accurately. The sense of realism is always gradual and relative, and not only in viewers, but also the contexts of film production, genre, etc. In silent film, characters' body language was normally highly exaggerated. This overacting nowadays is usually considered highly unrealistic; at the time, however, it was the familiar standard and was not perceived as noticeable, while other criteria were more decisive for a sense of realism.

The fact that film viewers disagree about whether a character seems realistic or not reveals the subjective differences in conceptions of reality but at the same time an intersubjective claim to validity. When I say, 'This character is realistic', my statement expresses not just my own opinion (such as with 'I don't like Ally McBeal'), but a claim to how the character in fact is. The statement expresses, firstly, that the character conforms to the speaker's mental representations of reality, and secondly, that these representations are themselves correct. Thus, there are two aspects to the dispute about realism. If the opposing sides share conceptions of personality, sociality, and humanity, then the argument is about whether the representation of the character corresponds to these shared ideas. A deeper difference, however, may concern the folk-psychological, folk-sociological, or philosophical ideas about people themselves, and then the dispute also revolves around them. This explains the existence of competing ideas about realism in film. One viewer group regards the consistent, easily grasped characters in mainstream cinema as realistic, for example the lovers in *Titanic*. Others dispute this and consider the difficult-to-grasp, contradictory characters in art cinema more realistic, for example in the films of Antonioni or Cassavetes' *Faces* (see Bordwell 1985a: 206ff.). The viewers' and filmmakers' differing conceptions of people are behind this.

The essential basis for characters to seem realistic is therefore whether the character model and its system of traits are perceived to be coherent and whether they correspond with viewer's mental representations of humans in general and certain social groups in particular: "The most important prerequisite for the "effet de réel", or "realistic" storytelling, is the plausibility and therefore the gestalt of the represented world. Furthermore, certain narrative styles seem "more mimetic", i.e., they are more likely to produce an "illusion mimétique" than others' (Koch 1991: 172).

How is realism created on the level of the representation? Christine Brooke-Rose (1981: 85–102, 239) has compiled an overview of relevant methods in literature. These

general techniques apply particularly for character representation as ‘the pride of realism’ (ibid.: 95). Moreover, they can be adapted for the medium of film; in film studies, comparable but not quite as comprehensive approaches exist (see Kirsten 2009 on Bazin and Oudard). The various techniques aim particularly at two results: comprehensibility and a wealth of information. Realism reflects the desire to convey information about reality. One of the ways this takes place is through comprehensive descriptions or depictions of the fictional world. Comprehensibility can be approached, for instance, by using certain narrative and stylistic conventions, avoiding disruption of perception or ellipses, and respecting cultural subcodes, e.g., that of genre conformity.

One group of strategies aims particularly at providing an *abundance of information* about the character:

- The film conveys an extensive amount of information about the character’s backstory and past experiences, for instance in childhood. It repeatedly refers back to things it has already represented and announces others to come (by means of analepsis and prolepsis, flashbacks, summaries, or a character’s recurring obsessions). This frequent appeal to memory is also intended to generate coherence and ensure comprehensibility.
- The information is not communicated by personal narrators or other narrative methods that would call attention to the process of narration itself. Instead, proxies may be used. Thus, the most important function of some characters is to convey information, e.g., experts such as scientists who explain things to other characters. These informant characters are particularly aware, provide explanations for events, and perform technical actions. A few such characters can be found in *Jurassic Park*, e.g., mathematicians and palaeontologists.
- The fictional world becomes the subject of an exhaustive representation. Many textual elements have a ‘realism function’ (Bordwell 1985a: 19ff.). Rather than performing a function in terms of plot, theme, aesthetics, or emotionalisation, they are intended to evoke a reality effect by making the narration seem comprehensive and authentic, avoiding conventional patterns of dramatisation, showing the fictional world to have a level of complexity close to reality, and providing a wealth of knowledge about this world. Location shooting often serves this purpose, and artificial worlds are created on studio sets down to the last detail, which is then highlighted by framing and editing. At the same time, the assumption that this world is diverse and contingent can produce an aesthetic of discontinuity, a composition in detailed tableaux, fragments, slices of life, and mosaics. Narrative passages serve as a hook for descriptive sequences and alternate with them; sometimes characters are introduced just so they can describe their lifeworld.

- Characters' everyday environments and normal activities are represented in particular detail. This representation is distinguished by redundancy and predictability, and its typical motifs are inventories and rituals. Viewers are enabled to recognise the familiar, and they should feel at home in the characters' world and feel it is familiar.
- This corresponds to an avoidance of emotional motifs. Emotional outbursts on the part of characters in response to dramatic, euphoric, or dysphoric events—idylls, passionate love scenes, ecstasies, tear-jerking scenes, spectacular deaths—deviate from normal, everyday routine. They can seem to be exaggerated and draw attention to the intended emotionalisation or the genre-typical strategies being used.¹³
- Efforts to ensure redundancy and completeness of the representation result in a cyclothymic (regularly changing) narrative rhythm. Every possible position in a paradigmatic distribution of events and traits should appear: 'good' and 'bad' phases of action alternate, and characters should never have solely good or bad traits.
- When as much information as possible is conveyed about as many characters as possible, the protagonist's position within the character constellation is weakened. Christine Brooke-Rose speaks of a defocalisation of the hero. While the protagonist still is the most important element for comprehensibility and disambiguation and thus his or her identity cannot be fragmented and the narrative functions must be maintained, other devices work against the character's centrality. The focalisation changes, resulting in multi-perspectivity. The narrative can often move away from the protagonist, and other characters can take on important actions and positively judged traits. This can lead to conceptions of the antihero or difficulty in deciding which character is the protagonist.

Five further devices are intended to promote characters' *comprehensibility*:

- What Brooke-Rose calls 'semiological compensation' in literature, support of the linguistic text by additional illustrations, is already present in film as the five sign levels of image, written language, spoken language, sounds, and music. The varied sign systems can augment characterisation or create redundancies, thereby facilitating understanding.
- The story's events comprise mainly characters' intentional actions or are triggered by such actions. These actions can be attributed to easily recognisable motives and goals, and improbable coincidences are avoided.

¹³ Christine Brooke-Rose rejects this thesis of Hamon, since she sees the criteria for euphoria and dysphoria as too dependent on personal differences (1981: 96-97), but she fails take into account that the other criteria depend on the recipient, as well.

Thus, the plot's development is determined by a psychological, character-centred causality.¹⁴

- The narrative aims at an impression of objective, non-commenting representation through a 'transparent' representational style, in film, for example, by means of the system of stylistic conventions termed an 'institutional mode of representation' (see Chapter 7). This includes a certain kind of lighting, subtle camera movements, avoiding violations of the 180-degree rule or underacting and overacting, etc. Furthermore, limitation to a single narrative level is intended to make the viewers be more involved and to reduce their felt distance from the narrative world. A character as narrator standing between viewers and the action, which would put a subjective spin on matters, is not used (Eder 1999: 85–87).
- Other strategies aim at disambiguating the character and the story. Characters are easier to understand when their traits are not contradictory, their motives and personality are easily recognisable, and no doubt exists regarding their identity. Appearance and reality of characters coincide, the presence of misleading clues should be avoided, and secrets and mysteries should be clearly indicated and cleared up by the conclusion.
- The fiction's embeddedness in real contexts incorporates historical, geographic, and biographical facts, and transfers the appearance of factuality from reality to the fictional world. *The Day of the Jackal* is about a fictional assassination attempt on the historical French president Charles de Gaulle in the real Paris.

A number of narrative strategies contribute to a realistic form of representation: presenting the character across a wide temporal span in the story, the use of informant characters, an exhaustive amount of detail, emphasis on daily life, avoiding conspicuously dramatic motifs, mixing good and evil, the hero's loss of significance, redundant use of all sign systems, psychological causality in the plot, inconspicuousness of the representational techniques, the absence of contradictions, clarity of the psyche, and embeddedness in real contexts. In the medium of film, these narrative strategies of realist representation are connected to specifically cinematic techniques: for instance, an intricate production design, deep staging, micro-acting connected with the use of household items and other props, a slower editing rhythm, and most importantly, the long shot and the long take, which show an abundance of detail and provide the time to let the eye wander in the moving image. Discussion of such cinematic techniques have been a staple of film aesthetics since André Bazin's famous text about De Sica's neorealist film *Umberto D.* (see Kirsten 2009).

Different strategies of realist representation often collide, and realism therefore

14 See Bordwell 1985a: 13ff; Eder 1999: 78–82.

reveals internal tensions (Brooke-Rose 1981: 90). Efforts to relate as much as possible about as many characters as possible reduces the amount of information provided for each of them and can make them more difficult to understand. Already the understanding of a single character can be made harder by an excess of specific, technical information. Narrative conventions can contradict real-world knowledge, and 'didactic' conveyance of information can call attention to the narrative process. The strategies of redundancy, coherence, and the inconspicuousness of storytelling bring up the question of where to place purely descriptive elements that do not carry the plot, but give a feeling of realism through the abundance of details and their apparent lack of a function for the plot.

The above techniques of representation alone cannot make a character seem realistic, but they contribute to this effect. Realism depends on how a story is told, but also on what is told: whether the viewers are able to construct a character model that matches their mental representations of humans in general and humans of the specific kind being represented. In the history of cinema the tensions between the various factors of realism have led to various forms and ideas of realism. What is considered a realistic representation in mainstream movies differs significantly from the realism of art cinema (see the thoughts on character conceptions in the last section of this chapter).

Furthermore, characters can differ from standards of realism in various ways. For example, they can be unintentionally unrealistic or deliberately non-realistic. Some characters are psychologically unrealistic: they do not conform to expectations about internal life, personality, and corresponding behaviour patterns ('If he really loved her, he would never do that!'). Sociologically unrealistic characters contradict knowledge about social contexts ('No baker can afford a Bentley!'). Physiologically unrealistic characters possess traits and abilities like no other beings of their kind ('No fifty-year-old could jump over such a wide ravine!'). Stereotypical characters are often criticised as being unrealistic in some of these senses (see above).

Intentionally non-realistic characters can be set up as *fantastic* figures, e.g., inhabitants of a fantasy or science-fiction world where certain things that do not exist in reality are possible. Superman and Dracula have traits that are consensually regarded as belonging to non-reality. Fantasy characters can correspond to realistic ones, such as in *The Wizard of Oz*, where the characters in Dorothy's dream have counterparts among those around her when she wakes up. *Stylised, artificial, or abstract* characters deviate from mental representations of reality in other ways than fantasy characters; their specific aesthetic strategies emphasise certain trait areas and reduce or exclude others. This foregrounds a character's nature as an artefact, its constructedness. Another example of extreme stylisation can be found in Alex Gopher's music video 'The Child' (see Chapter 4, Figure 3): its characters and their entire environment consist exclusively of written words that describe their physical, mental, or social traits. In *Lola rennt/Run Lola Run*, the title character is mostly embodied by actress Franka

Pontente, but in some sequences also stylised when the film switches to animation. The characters' artificiality in Resnais's *Mélo* is emphasised by the theatrical backdrop and an artificial acting style. Lastly, role-distant acting shapes the characters of many films by Rainer-Werner Fassbinder, Andy Warhol, or Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. In these cases, the characters could be described more precisely as alienated in a Bertolt Brechtian sense—here, the conventions of realism are violated in various ways to reduce viewers' immersion in the represented world and induce them to take on a distanced, reflecting perspective on the characters. In the case of *exaggerated, expressionistic, or caricatured characters*—for example the protagonists in comedies like *A Fish Called Wanda*, members of the bourgeoisie in Eisenstein's films, and the gangsters in *M*—specific complexes of traits are consciously exaggerated. Overacting and hyper-expressive faces and gestures can intensify this effect. All those forms of realism and deviations from them influence a wide range of character conceptions that will be introduced in the last part of this chapter.

Complexity, Consistency, Multidimensionality, and Other Artefact Dimensions

Individualisation/typification and realism/non-realism are only two especially important qualities of characters as artefacts. In the following, I will explain how characters can be examined in light of their complexity, consistency, dynamism, transparency, homogeneity, and multidimensionality, and take a first look at their symbolism. Again, these qualities should not be understood as absolutes, but as gradual, as is indicated by frequent differences of opinion concerning whether a character is one-dimensional or multidimensional, complex or simple. Many of the following artefact dimensions are closely related to individualisation and realism. A high degree of complexity, coherence, dimensionality, nuance, dynamism, and individualisation strengthens the impression that a character is realistic. But in this case too, the ultimate criterion for these qualities lies in the (ideal) character models. Not even all the conventions of realistic representation are sufficient to make characters seem realistic if they deviate significantly from folk-psychological or folk-sociological ideas. And furthermore, no amount of detail is enough to make a character seem complex if it fits an overly familiar schema.

Complex/simple: simple characters are either defined by a small number of traits, or they conform closely to a certain type. The patients in Nanni Moretti's *La stanza del figlio / The Son's Room* are an example: they are seen almost exclusively during psychotherapy sessions and are reduced to symptoms of hysteria, aggression, or depression, which make their other traits seem unimportant. In contrast, the trait systems of complex characters contain numerous relevant traits in various areas that are intertwined in different ways, and their trait systems do not conform to a single type. Characters can be complex even if only a few of their traits are explicitly presented; these need

only invite associations of a diverse system of further traits (cf. Tomasi 1988: 49). A character's complexity can increase viewer interest, but it can also result in frustration or hinder the story's progress unnecessarily. The proper amount of complexity—from the perspective of production—depends on the genre and on the character's importance and function. Action films, adventure films, farces, or cartoons use rather simple characters like Tom and Jerry, while more complex characters are needed in psychological dramas about personal and inner conflicts (McKee 1997: 107). But also in Ingmar Bergman's or Michelangelo Antonioni's arthouse films, minor characters with little screen time generally have a low level of complexity.

Coherent/incoherent, consistent/inconsistent: there is a long tradition of aiming at coherence in character construction. In 1804, German novelist Jean Paul called for the following:

Every character, no matter how chameleonicly and colourfully it is painted together, must show a basic colour as the unity which links everything in a soulful way ... If the poet could not bring this spiritual centre to life immediately on the threshold of entry [into the narrative], then all deeds and events do not help the dead mass to rise; it never becomes the source of a deed, but every deed itself creates it anew. (Jean Paul 1974: 224)

In mainstream film similar rules still apply, as is shown by this excerpt from a screenwriting manual:

Characters need to be consistent. This does not mean that they are predictable or stereotypical. It means that characters, like people, have a kind of core personality that defines who they are and gives us expectations about how they will act. If characters deviate from this core, they may come across as incredible, as not making sense or adding up. (Seger 1990: 29)

In other words, characters are coherent when their traits are closely linked and refer to one another as well as to some mutual core. Furthermore, they are consistent when their traits fit together and are not contradictory. The presence of a core of traits makes viewers expect certain others: 'A consistent character has certain qualities that in turn imply other qualities' (Seger 1990: 30). If a character is introduced as an expert on early Christian history, the viewers can expect that she is probably also a skilled researcher and interested in related subject areas, belongs to the middle class, loves art, is familiar with church history in general, and visits archaeological excavations. While the convention of coherence and consistency generally applies to mainstream and realistic films, they nevertheless often contain instances of unintentional incoherence or inconsistency. In other types of films, incoherence or inconsistency may be used intentionally to alienate the character, create comedy, irritate the viewer's perception, or stress the artificiality of the cinematic form.

Various kinds of contradictions in the trait system can make a character seem inconsistent, so there are different kinds of inconsistency: logically inconsistent traits analytically exclude each other; for instance, a character cannot be at the same time

ninety and twenty years old, or taller and shorter than another character (at least, in broadly realist films). Physical inconsistency occurs, for example, when a hero without superpowers jumps across a sixty-foot-wide ravine. A temporally inconsistent character might use today's jargon in a peplum film. A sociologically inconsistent nurse might live in a flat that no real nurse could afford. At the centre of most disputes, however, are claims of psychological inconsistency based on folk-psychological probability judgements. Characters that supposedly have a photographic memory but then forget important things, or that are called warm-hearted but allow others to suffer, are inconsistent in this way. Examples of psychologically inconsistent characters are not difficult to find: in the German TV movie *Ein Yeti zum Verlieben*, a primate researcher is represented as being extremely shy in romantic matters. But while fleeing from an angry mob with an injured yeti and in front of his young daughter, he professes his love for a journalist in an extended, eloquent monologue. This action fails to match the viewers' previous conception of the character's personality, and in the absence of any other diegetic explanation, it can only be explained on a reflective level as the filmmakers' fault.

As suggested by this example and the quotations above, inconsistency often results from characters' actions. The contradictory nature of some is only apparent, and they can be explained when the character's true motives or inner conflicts emerge. In other cases, however, contradictory actions may point to character traits or motives that from a folk-psychological perspective do not fit the character's core personality traits. They can be shown through dialogue, external commentary, the character's external features, perceptions, or environment, etc. Basically, the criterion for consistency of characters as represented beings is that their traits and behaviour fit generally accepted assumptions of plausibility or can be explained by means of ad hoc rules.

Characters can be considered more or less coherent and consistent not only as represented beings, but also in their representation as artefacts. For example, character depictions seem incoherent if bits of information about the character are not well connected to each other in the film. And character depictions can seem inconsistent when they change in the course of the film suddenly and without apparent reason, such as when the acting style suddenly changes from 'realistic' method acting to an exaggerated comic style, or the lighting patterns or musical leitmotifs linked to the character are suddenly replaced by others that seem 'unsuitable'. The impression of consistency can be fostered when changes in a character conform to a repeated formal pattern (Dyer 1999: 96). An example of this would be Peter Wuss's model of 'topic lines' as subliminally perceived patterns of cinematic cues (Wuss 2009: 25–30; 68–81).

Flat/round; one-dimensional/multidimensional: early in the previous century, the novelist Edward Morgan Forster laid out his famous distinction between 'flat' characters with a single idea or trait and 'round' characters with myriad traits (1927: 103–118). In the area of film, the most common terms are 'one-dimensional' and 'multidimensional' characters; the meanings are similar but refer directly to the criterion of trait dimensions.

The external features of all film characters always suggest a number of traits, and even when only one is explicitly foregrounded, additional traits can be inferred from it (halo effect, see Chapter 5). Therefore, flat or one-dimensional characters do not necessarily have a small number of traits, but what sets them apart is that their trait system is dominated by a small number of dimensions that fit together, while all other features are subordinate. Such characters normally conform to a certain type, are easy to comprehend, and exhibit predictable behaviour. The attribution of 'flatness' need not necessarily be negative. In the same way as other types, flat characters have the advantage of being easy to recognise and remember. They need not seem lifeless, as is shown, according to Forster, by some eccentric Charles Dickensian characters.

The somewhat vague expression that characters are round or multidimensional can also be clarified with the aid of the considerations above. Round characters are complex and individual, and are set apart by uncommon and non-typical, but nevertheless believable combinations of traits. In other words, they do not conform to a schema, but instead display traits that at first may seem psychologically or sociologically inconsistent, but make sense on second thought. As a result, they are not predictable, and their behaviour can surprise the viewer repeatedly. The script consultant Robert McKee summarises this in his formula 'dimension means contradiction' (1997: 378). He claims that multidimensional characters have either contradictions in their personalities (such as with the combination of unscrupulousness and guilt in the protagonists of *Macbeth* or *Das Spinnennetz/Spider's Web*) or contradictions between their first appearance and true character (such as the 'good-bad girl' in film noir). These explicable contradictions are expressed when multidimensional characters react in different but consistent ways in various situations: sometimes fearful, sometimes courageous or impudent in the presence of one character and shy in the presence of another. In contrast, a one-dimensional character like Superman is never afraid. Since the character's behaviour varies according to the situation, it is more difficult for viewers to make an unequivocal and blanket attribution of personality traits such as courage or shyness. The character may be courageous after a good night's sleep and timid when tired. We must differentiate, examine our prejudices, consider the context, and refrain from judging strongly in relation to individual traits, forming careful hypotheses that take in several different characteristics and situations instead.

Frequent mention is made of 'nuanced' characters in film reviews or script editing, which can be understood as a subgroup of round, multidimensional, complex, and individual characters, namely those with consistent and interesting traits that are rather peripheral in terms of their function for the plot. These are details that underline the character's plausibility, richness, and lifelike nature by being realistic, and clearly reflect precise observation on the part of the filmmakers which is confirmed by viewers' experience.

Static/dynamic: this dimension involves two different aspects: firstly, whether the character model, the viewer's conception of the character, changes significantly in

the course of the film. Silien (Belmondo) in *Le doulos* seems to be an unscrupulous traitor, until it is later revealed that he was an unreservedly loyal friend the entire time. In contrast, James Bond or John McClane in *Die Hard* are immediately shown to be heroes, which they remain. In a second meaning of 'static', however, not only Bond and McClane, but also Silien would be considered static figures, because their trait systems do not change in any significant way: McClane is always courageous, Silien always loyal. Dynamic characters, on the other hand, undergo far-reaching developments within their trait systems in the course of the film (see Chapter 6). The character's traits, states, or relationships can change gradually or abruptly (e.g., when the hero's evil side gains the upper hand). In *The Fly*, charming scientist Jeff Brundle becomes the repulsive Brundlefly. Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* gradually disintegrates behind her controlled façade until violence suddenly erupts from within. Other characters alternate from one state of being to another, thereby showing an oscillating dynamic, even if they remain static in this state: Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. On the other hand, the changeable and unpredictable, transgressional and enigmatic characters in modernist art cinema, despite all changes externally and in behaviours, are often actually static. They remain changeable, transgressional, and enigmatic, and frequently their problems do not change either (e.g., the emotionally unstable male characters in Antonioni's films, Mona in Agnès Varda's *Sans toit ni loi/Vagabond*, Godard's *Pierrot le fou/Pierrot the Fool*). In such cases, characters may seem dynamic, but there is no goal-oriented change involved.

Transparent/opaque: this dimension involves the question of how much the viewer learns about a character's inner life and personality (see Chapters 5 and 6). With transparent characters such as those in mainstream cinema, no important questions go unanswered and any mysteries are cleared up by means of flashbacks that often reveal the character's relevant trauma (*The Silence of the Lambs*, *Twister*, etc.). With opaque characters, such as those of Robert Bresson and Michelangelo Antonioni, the inner life is cloaked in shadows; explicit representations of subjectivity (dreams, etc.) are not provided or remain puzzling, and it is difficult to draw simple, monocausal conclusions about actions on the basis of inner life. This points the viewer in the direction of other, empathic alternatives for grasping characters' inner processes and personality traits (see Chapter 13).

Closed/open; whole/fragmentary: a character can be regarded as closed and 'whole' when the character model is complete, all essential trait areas are included, and no conspicuous gaps remain. This is the case when all significant questions concerning the character's trait system have been answered. Closure does not mean that no more questions are possible, because characters always involve some uncertainty, and character models can be further elaborated after viewing a film. Nor does this mean that all essential traits are represented directly, since it is enough if one can make solid assumptions about them. Closure can be understood as meaning that the film

does not raise any major questions relating to the character that remain unanswered. Hollywood cinema and most TV movies, but also the socially engaged films of Ken Loach, normally strive to ensure the greatest possible degree of character closure, since this gives viewers a pleasant feeling of being able to orient themselves and understand the situation.

Some more experimental film forms strive to avoid precisely this feeling, instead intending to give rise to questions that will occupy viewers' minds after the film ends. The open, fragmentary characters in Antonioni's and Bresson's works involve questions that concern the nature and needs of humans. Open characters show a 'fundamentally irreducible ambiguity' (Pfister 1988: 246). They give rise to questions to which a definitive answer is not possible and reveal gaps that cannot be closed with certainty because the textual signs are ambiguous or contradictory. Why did the character act that way? What were its motives, and which of its personality traits can explain these motives? Such questions elicit more intensive elaboration of the character model.

Symbolic, allegorical, emblematic, exemplifying/non-exemplifying: the character as a symbol, a bearer of indirect meanings, is dealt with in greater detail in Chapter 11, but providing a few anticipatory remarks at this point will be helpful. Characters may be sufficient to themselves, being absorbed by the narrated world, or they can serve as secondary signs or symbols that carry more abstract or higher-level meanings (see Tomasi 1988: 48).

In most cases, the more one-dimensional and typified the character, the more obviously the symbolic intention stands out. For this reason, Linda Seger joins a character's symbolism and dimensionality in a continuum, with the one-dimensional symbolic character at one end (1990: 175–78). The traits of Ares, the Greek god of war, all fit the theme of war and express it (also in his cinematic appearances). He is belligerent and unpopular with the other gods, drives a war chariot, shouts as loud as 10,000 men, transforms into a raging boar, is accompanied by his son Phobos (fear) and sister Eris (discord), and his sacred bird is the vulture. Seger places multidimensional characters such as Rick in *Casablanca* at the other end of the scale, though it will be shown that they too can have a symbolic function (see Chapter 11). The medieval character Everyman or Superman and his multidimensional alter ego, Clark Kent, lie between the two poles.

An extreme example of one thing standing for something else is the allegorical or emblematic character, the *personification*: 'In this case, the set of information that defines the character is extremely small and serves in its entirety to illustrate an abstract concept in all its consequences' (Pfister 1988: 244). While this character conception appeared in many medieval morality plays as personified vices and virtues, it is rather rare in modern cinema. Obviously, symbolic characters are normally secondary figures taken from other narrative forms (such as the three Fates in Griffith's *Intolerance*). Death is occasionally personified, for instance in comedies such as Woody Allen's *Love and Death* and Rainer Matsutani's *Nur über meine Leiche/Over My Dead Body*, and in dramas

and romances (*Meet Joe Black*). At times, such personifications are thematised directly, such as in *Seven*. The serial killer selects his victims on the basis of how they embody a mortal sin—though in his eyes only, not those of the viewer. Examples of symbolic characters can also be found in Jean Cocteau's films, such as *Orphée*, in which the ancient singer represents poets in general. In a later film adaptation of the Orpheus story, *Orfeu Negro*, Death appears in the form of a carnival mask.

Thus, explicit symbolism and personification are rare in contemporary film productions, or even frowned upon in certain genres; on the other hand, more inconspicuous *exemplification* is easy to find.¹⁵ Various interpretations, e.g., of *Fargo* as a morality play and the police officer as the personification of good (Beavis 2001), should be understood more as thought experiments with analogies, and they employ the concept of personification in a much broader sense. When critics claim that a character such as Judge Dredd is the 'personification of uncompromising justice', the underlying idea is that the character exemplifies the characteristic without being limited and reduced to it. 'Exemplification' in this case denotes, as the term is employed by Nelson Goodman, that the character not only possesses the relevant characteristic involved (e.g., uncompromising justice), it also makes a reference to this abstract trait and says something about it (for example, that uncompromising justice always wins): 'Exemplification is possession plus reference' (Goodman 1976: 53). Like a swatch of material from a book of samples, the character serves as one concrete example of a large number of other instances, thus conveying the 'general in the particular', the 'ideal in the real'. Finding characters to which this does not at all apply may be difficult—after all, all characters must have traits, and traits are always general. Georg Lukács's conception of protagonists whose 'intellectual physiognomy' and problems are intended to illustrate typical contemporary problems without losing their specific, individual personality must also be considered here (Lukács 1970 [1936]). In a more inclusive sense, Umberto Eco termed a character a 'type' that vividly exemplifies easily recognisable moods, traits, and experiences and permits shared experience of them (Eco 1984a: 169). In other words, this is not a typified character as we understand it, but an individual, complex, multidimensional, exemplifying character in which viewers can recognise themselves, or that, as a symbol, enables a better understanding of their own experiences. Characters' exemplification or symbolism is therefore not inextricably linked to their one-dimensionality, even if one-dimensionality makes them more striking.

Psychological/transpsychological: Manfred Pfister makes an additional distinction for drama, one that is rarely found in the field of cinema: he draws a line between 'psychological' characters whose actions are also determined by the irrational, drives, and the preconscious and subconscious, and who do not have a complete and clear knowledge of themselves; and 'transpsychological' characters who demonstrate a superhuman and unlikely self-knowledge, which points out their nature as an artefact and an authorial or narrating instance that provides commentary:

15 For a more detailed discussion of exemplification in film, see Yacavone 2015: Chapter 5.

Thus, by a transpsychologically conceived figure we mean one whose level of self-awareness transcends the level of what is psychologically plausible, whose utterly rational and conscious forms of self-commentary can no longer be accounted for in terms of the characteristic expression of an utterly rational and conscious being. Instead, the dramatic figure has become a medium of epic commentary which integrates it into a prescribed system of values. (Pfister 1993: 182)

As an example, Pfister mentions the epilogue of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1988: 112–16), which was adapted to film by Peter Greenaway (*Prospero's Books*). Further examples are ironic use of the chorus, e.g., in Woody Allen's *Mighty Aphrodite*, songs in certain musicals, and addressing the audience directly, as in the film adaptation of Nick Hornby's novel *High Fidelity*.

In summary, it can be said that the character model's structure leads to differentiation between at least two discrete types of character attributes: firstly, diegetic traits relating to physicality, psyche, sociality, and behaviour that the character has according to the story (Chapters 5 and 6); and secondly, artefact qualities that viewers assign to characters through a meta-discourse that reflects on diegetic traits, the way they are developed, and ideas about people and narrative conventions. These qualities relate to characters as constructs or artefacts. Their most important dimensions are a character's degree of individualisation or typification (concerning its conformity to a collective prototype) and realism (concerning its conformity to ideas of reality and representation). Further artefact qualities concern the character's complexity, consistency, dynamism, transparency, dimensionality, symbolism, or (trans)psychological construction.

Such artefact qualities form both constellations which are typical or normative in certain modes of film production. In mainstream film, most protagonists are supposed to be realistic, individualised, consistent, psychological, multidimensional, closed, dynamic, (not overly) complex, and exemplifying in an inconspicuous way. Secondary characters are more typified, one-dimensional, and static. Antagonists show a wider spectrum. Monsters in horror films are rarely multidimensional, and partners in screwball comedies and thrill killers can be more complex and realistic than the hero. The meanings of such patterns should not be underestimated, because characters' artefact qualities influence the viewers' imaginative closeness to characters and the affective involvement with them (see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14). Realism, naturalism, individualisation, and complexity tend to facilitate closeness and sympathy, while alienation, disruption of perception, excessive or insufficient complexity, stylisation, idealisation, abstraction, and a clichéd nature reduce it. Vice versa, great closeness and emotional attractiveness can make a character seem more realistic, complex, and individual. In the following sections, a few constellations of artefact qualities that have consolidated into frequently used character conceptions in different kinds of films (and other media) will be presented.

8.2 Character Conceptions as Conventions of Representation

As just suggested, characters' artefact qualities form specific patterns: for example, a character is 'realistic + complex + dynamic', another one 'alienated + simple + static'. I term this specific constellation of artefact qualities a *character conception* (*Figurenkonzeption*).¹⁶ A character conception can be seen as a very general type of character anchored in conventions of media production and reception, in which representational and stylistic features are combined with content-related ideas. Individual artefact qualities, but even more their constellation in character conceptions, are not only linked with creative conventions in media and narrative representation, but also with certain ideas about real humans, as shown by the example of realism. Calling a character realistic requires assumptions about basic human traits. Character conceptions are normally conventionalised, though they are also open to variation. With his alienation strategy, for example, Brecht introduced a new kind of character conception that broke with existing conventions aimed at empathy. The relationships between character synthesis, manners of representation, trait systems, types, and character conceptions are illustrated in Diagram 17.

In terms of production aesthetics, character conceptions serve as general models according to which concrete individual characters are constructed, in short, as guidelines for characterisation. They are thus a basis for norms about what makes up a 'good' character: e.g., credibility and realism versus alienation and stylisation. On this basis, they also guide the selection of certain strategies of audiovisual representation and information distribution (see Chapter 7). Character conceptions depend on filmmakers' aims and the modes of film production, the historically variable norm systems for telling and understanding stories that have developed on the basis of sociocultural circumstances (see Bordwell 1985a: 149–55). They are variable and always influenced by various factors of history, culture, and society. Exactly because of that, however, it is important to describe them as standard patterns in the creation and perception of characters. While typologies are always simplifications, they enable reducing over-complexity and pointing out key differences that would otherwise go under in a sea of diversity.

The following typology of contemporary character conceptions is not intended to be complete and covers only a few widespread forms of main characters under the provisional terms 'mainstream realism', 'independent realism', 'postmodern', and 'stylisation/alienation'. With the first two conceptions, the viewer's attention shifts to the level of the character as a represented being; the other two guide it more towards the levels of artefacts, symbols, or symptoms.

16 Manfred Pfister defines 'character conception' differently, then lists solely artefact qualities (1988: 240–50), as does Richard Dyer (1999: 90–97).

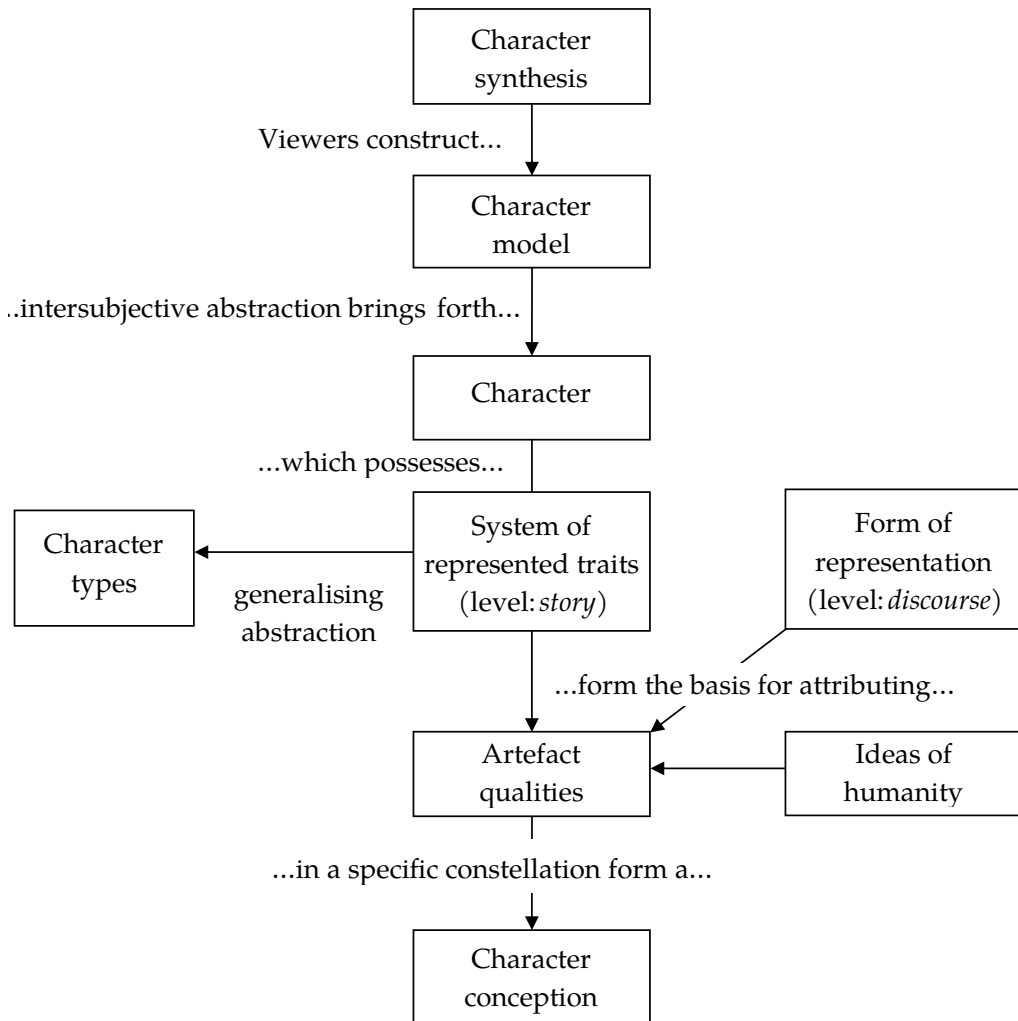


Diagram 17 From individual character synthesis to conventional character conceptions

Mainstream Realism

In contemporary cinema and during a great deal of film history, *mainstream realism* has been the dominant kind of character conception. This resembles what Richard Dyer describes as a 'novelistic conception of character' (1999: 93–100). At first, Dyer argues, employing the ideas of literary scholar Ian Watt, the dominant character conception underwent a general change from a type to an individual in the course of the development of the novel. The typified, heroic, or emblematic characters of early novels embodied moral or intellectual principles and represented ideas or ideals. With the rise of bourgeois society however, heroes in novels increasingly often resembled concrete humans in specific spatial, sociocultural, and historical situations. They developed from typified to individualised, from symbolic

to primarily diegetic characters. Dyer sees a similar development (within a much shorter period of time) in cinema. One example is the Western, in which mythical gallant cowboys were replaced by heroes with specific biographies, strengths and weaknesses, and the polarisation of good and evil gave way to a more nuanced distribution of values. At the same time, films focused less on plot and more on the characters. Film also moved closer to a 'novelistic' character conception (Dyer 1999: 91–92).

The following characteristics of this novelistic character conception, as listed by Dyer (*ibid.*: 93ff.), are to a great extent identical to the artefact qualities discussed above, or can be explained on that basis:

1. Characters should be individual and unique, i.e., they should possess a specific system of diegetic traits.
2. A humanistic and liberal appreciation of the diversity of human life that is incompatible with 'monistic' ideologies should be expressed through the character's uniqueness.
3. Characters should seem autonomous; viewers should not become conscious of their constructed nature or their narrative function and should have the illusion of real life instead.
4. Characters should be 'round' or multidimensional.
5. They should be dynamic and undergo development.
6. They should be transparent and their inner life should open up to the viewer.
7. Their actions should be psychologically motivated.
8. Viewers should be given the impression that the characters have their own identity beyond what they say or do, i.e., what is shown directly. This could be made more specific in terms of reception psychology: the form of representation should invite a wealth of character-related hypotheses and justified speculations concerning how the characters would behave in different situations; in other words, their explicit traits should suggest additional characteristics.
9. While the characters should be multidimensional and capable of surprising the viewer, this should take place within a consistent personality framework. In other words, there should be no (psycho) logical contradictions in the trait system, which is comprehensible and makes the character's behaviour appear credible in light of widespread personality theories, correspondences with media or social schemata, or ad hoc rules.
10. Viewers should 'identify' with the characters, empathise with them, or at least be able to sense familiarity.

A look at screenwriting guides backs up Dyer's theses,¹⁷ and all the characteristics named above are listed, explicitly or implicitly, in Linda Seger's introduction to the conception of 'realistic' characters (1990: 22–46 in particular). This is a clear sign that the 'novelistic' conception is still common in the field of film production as a norm system. (This also conforms to my personal experience with screenwriting.) However, Dyer's theses should be limited to mainstream film (which is backed up by the fact that he also presents a few 'alternative' character conceptions), and they can be deepened in a few areas. In the following, I will discuss 'mainstream realism' rather than the 'novelistic' conception (for more on the definition and dramatic structure of mainstream films, see Eder 1999).

Above all, the aspects of transparency and psychological motivation can be deepened in contrast to Dyer's concept, and the two are closely related. Transparency, the simple and relatively complete inferrability of the mainstream character's personality, inner life, and motives, is a product of the fact that character synthesis can be done within the framework of simple and obvious folk-psychological assumptions and widespread personality theories. This character synthesis occupies a middle ground between typification and individualisation. Considerable portions of the character's trait system conform to types that are differentiated, modified, and individualised within a limited framework. Linda Seger sums up the construction of a 'realistic' character as follows:

1. Through observation and experience, you begin to form an idea of a character.
2. The first broad strokes begin to define the character.
3. You define the character's consistency, so the character makes sense.
4. Adding quirks, the illogical, the paradoxical, makes the character fascinating and compelling.
5. The qualities of emotions, values, and attitudes deepen the character.
6. Adding details makes the character unique and specific. (Seger 1990: 46)

In this case, human complexity involves the addition of details, though not an excessive number; contradictions are all merely apparent and, being limited to minor areas, do not involve the character's fundamentals. The anthropological model on which such a character is based represents humans as having a relatively simply structured and stable psychological system, as being transparent, explainable, and comprehensible. This widespread, pleasantly reassuring idea of human nature, which is supported by the character conception, coincides with the objectives of mainstream film and conforms

17 In the filmic adaptation of 'novelistic' character conception, a few particular tendencies can be observed (Dyer 1999: 103). The aspect of 'identification' is emphasised in a more commercial medium, and the problem arises of how the inner life should be represented in a temporal medium that relies on narrative economy and visual appeal. In film, the plot is often more important than in a novel, and suspicion of manipulation through images can result in distance from the characters.

to an implicit logic of storytelling. Because the characters are easily understood, they do not frustrate the viewer, providing orientation instead. Their traits can be inferred quickly and without a great deal of effort, which is conducive to economic exposition and swift, plot-oriented storytelling. The characters' clear goals facilitate simple and effective generation of conflict and tension.

The easily understandable, narratively functional characters of mainstream realism are based on the folk-psychological assumption that humans are generally autonomous individuals with clear, comprehensible goals and personal responsibility. Popularised forms of psychoanalytical thought added a further aspect: characters are often influenced by early-childhood experiences and repressed wishes. In the final analysis, this pop-Freudian assumption provides a seamless psychological-sociological explanation for many behaviours. The viewer can be made aware of something that the character remains unconscious of, and at appropriate spots, early-childhood traumas are served up on a plate as backstory elements, for example the loss of parents and the crying of the lambs being slaughtered in *The Silence of the Lambs*. The dominant acting style since the 1960s, method acting, emphasises the involuntary expression of repressed drives or neuroses.

In addition to subject autonomy and popular Freudianism, *dramatisation* of the character is one of the central features of mainstream realism. One of the objectives of mainstream film is maximising conflict (Eder 1999: 35–40; Wuss 2009). Beyond the characters' clear, concrete, and conflicting goals, maximisation of emotions is necessary for this purpose. The greatest possible amount of joy and suffering should be provided. Thus, the protagonists must be rather extroverted, possess powerful wills and a wide emotional amplitude, and have an extremely intense emotional life. Other common traits of mainstream characters are relatively unambiguous moral positioning and similarity with the audience's values ('We like what's like us'). The characters' dynamism, the change they undergo, normally progresses in terms of the development of already established traits, learning something new, or a change for the better that confirms that the character's positive side has won out over the negative, making her or him finally capable of solving their conflict. Screenwriting guides also contain numerous references to these conventions.¹⁸

Thus, mainstream films convey a conception of humans according to which they are represented as active, determined, mostly rational, emotionally intense, assessable in a morally unambiguous way, easy to understand, coherent, capable of

18 Linda Seger (1990) lists the following as criteria: character consistency; paradoxical traits; multidimensionality; easily recognisable emotions, goals and attitudes; individual details; a backstory and a credible resulting psyche; interesting relationships with other characters; a well-researched context; functionality in the character hierarchy; characteristic dialogues; and development. These rules allow one to draw conclusions about intended effects: easy comprehensibility and judgement of the character, powerful affective involvement, narrative functionality, interest, credibility, 'realism', and conflict maximisation. The objective is dramatic intensification of the story and intentional guidance of the viewers' attention through character actions and development of the plot.

learning and developing, autonomous and not wholly controlled by external factors, with the exception of certain biographical influences that are rather limited and can be quite easily explained and understood. This is a conception of humanity that in its basic structures and independent of the concrete forms of specific characters is already positive, hopeful, and reassuring. Such films also convey a model of history and social progress that is based on individual consciousness and capabilities rather than collective or structural aspects of social life. At the same time, the characters' individuality masks their ideological role. If viewers identify with them as individuals, it is less noticeable that they are simultaneously identifying with a complex of norms (see Dyer 1999: 97).

Independent Realism

The character conception in many films categorised as independent cinema, auteur film, or art cinema—such as the films of Antonioni, Bergman, John Cassavetes, and Kelly Reichardt, or of Ryūsuke Hamaguchi, Naomi Kawase, Yasujirō Ozu, and Satyajit Ray—differ significantly from mainstream realism.¹⁹ Character conception in *independent realism* could also be called 'novelistic', using Dyer's term, but this would refer to modern rather than classical novels. Some of Dyer's criteria apply in this case as well, including individuality, multidimensionality, appreciation of human diversity, and the aim of evoking 'identification' and the illusion of a character identity that exceeds plot functions.²⁰ The differences from mainstream realism are significant, however. Characters and their motives in independent cinema are not as clearly and easily understandable as in most mainstream films; their emotionality is not exaggerated, but rather played down and often made ambiguous; morally assessing them is more difficult; their behaviour is frequently inconsistent; their feelings and goals are dedramatised rather than intensified; these characters have no clear awareness of goals and problems; and they are often passive.

The distinction between the two varieties of realism that I develop further here in regard to character conception is based on David Bordwell's work on narration in the fiction film (1985: 206–13). In the areas of both plot and characters, according to Bordwell, films with 'classical narration' (which I term mainstream films here) and those with 'art-cinema narration' (independent cinema in my terminology) are based on a different understanding of 'realism' with different conventions.²¹

19 On the differentiation of mainstream and independent film and other modes of film production such as postmodern/post-classical cinema, see Eder 2002b. 'Independent film' is not understood here as meaning films produced by relatively small production companies independently of a larger studio, but a product category that consciously sets itself apart from mainstream conventions in content and style.

20 There are also other varieties of the last element, e.g., in Jean-Luc Godard's films.

21 See also Michael Z. Newman's detailed study on characterisation in US independent film (2007).



Fig. 30 Sandro (Gabriele Ferzetti) and Claudia (Monica Vitti) in Antonioni's *L'avventura* correspond to the character conception of independent realism. (Dir. Michelangelo Antonioni, *L'avventura*, 1960, Cino Del Duca Produzioni/Cinematografiche Europee Société/Cinématographique Lyre, Italy. All rights reserved.)

An example of the character conception in independent film is Michelangelo Antonioni's 'trilogia dell'incomunicabilità', which comprises the three films *L'avventura* (Figure 30), *L'eclisse*, and *La notte*. The characters are embedded in a plot structure that could be termed a *dramaturgy of contingency*. This structure is based on a kind of chaos theory of action: a small number of clearly recognisable physical and psychological causes are *not* assumed to explain actions and events, and they do *not* arise—as in classical drama and mainstream film—in a deterministic and monocausal way from the circumstances of a neatly arranged situation and clearly defined character traits. Rather, an impression is given that it all could have happened differently; the causes of each action are complex; and each event is the product of a multitude of minor coincidences, wavering opinions, sudden inspirations, and changing moods.

Following Seymour Chatman, the main features of Antonioni's composition of the 'open text' can be summed up with the terms 'dedramatisation', 'denarrativisation', and 'marginalisation' (Chatman 1985: 73–85). This differentiates both the world inhabited by the characters, the events they are involved in, and their manner of representation from mainstream conventions. Accordingly, the characters themselves also differ from the mainstream conception, above all in terms of essential artefact qualities: they are opaque rather than psychologically transparent, ambivalent rather than clearly defined, volatile rather than normatively clearly located, emotionally uncertain rather than dramatic, and static in the constant change of their behaviour rather than dynamic.

Firstly, there is their *opacity*. Compared to the transparent characters in mainstream cinema, these characters' emotions, goals, and motives are difficult to read. In mainstream films, the basic rule applies that clearly sketched characters deal with a concrete problem and have the specific goal of solving that problem (Bordwell 1985a: 157ff.; Eder 1999: 78ff.). In contrast, Antonioni's characters have inner rather than outer problems, and they are *not* clearly aware of those problems, thus they *cannot* have the explicit goal of solving them. Above all, their problems are complex and diffuse, rather than simple and clearly defined. These characters tend to drift along rather than struggle. They are uncertain about their own motives. Their problem arises and fades away repeatedly, like an annoying itch. The simple explanations provided by folk psychology do not necessarily work here. Moreover, this kind of independent film withholds information about its characters. Dialogue provides meagre characterisation, and characters often display minimalistic, ambiguous, or enigmatic facial expressions. At times, their faces are hidden, and their bodies blend into environments that say more about their inner lives than their behaviour does, though generally indirectly. Little is learned about their past history.

In Antonioni's films, this kind of opaque character portrayal conveys the theme of a 'disease of the emotions' in modern society. More generally, they also present a picture of humanity that differs from the narrative mainstream and that Bordwell calls 'subjective realism' (1985: 208). According to this, what goes on in people is even more complex and contingent than the external events. An implicit theory of the emotions underlies and is expressed in this form of cinema. Static poses, concealed glances, fading laughter, aimless wandering, and emotional landscapes as expressive devices have become standardised strategies of subjective realism in 'art cinema narration', as Bordwell terms it. At the same time, this involves an attempt to approximate everyday human behaviour. The knowledge contained in the old hermeneutic applies: *individuum est ineffabile*. A vector diagram depicting the psychological forces acting on the characters would be too complex to sketch with a few simple lines, as would be possible for mainstream character conception. Their inner life is merely suggested. The films hold the viewers in an external distance, but exactly because of that invite them to imagine the characters' situations from the inside and to empathise with them, because that is the only way to make sense of the characters' actions and to understand the story and its meaning.

Even if the characters are more opaque than mainstream heroes, they are not constantly impenetrable. A back and forth between closeness and distance takes place, in terms of both the characters' bodies and their minds. This involves an emotional *volatility*: just as the viewers vacillate between distance and empathy, the characters waver in regard to other characters. While in the world of mainstream film the action never ceases and protagonists' personality cores remain constant and

undergo solely partial and gradual change as the result of easily understandable learning processes, rather the opposite is true, for example, in Antonioni's trilogy. Extreme intimacy and unfamiliarity are directly juxtaposed. In their never-ending process of fluctuation, the characters are more static than dynamic. Their emotionality proves to be fractured: they rarely show joy that is not tinged with sorrow, or sorrow without joy. Mixed feelings are predominant, which dedramatises the action. Pain is not always unbearable, joy is not always indescribable, and love is not always the most powerful of all feelings.

Not only the characters' emotions constantly change, but also their motivations for action. The inconsistency and erratic nature of their behaviour—such as Sandro's willingness to save Anna's life at the risk of his own while casually cheating on her at the same time in *L'avventura*—makes unambiguous determination of a character's personality more difficult. There are no clear goals of action, merely unstable feelings and beliefs. This contributes to increased uncertainty about the moral judgement of characters, which in many cases depends to a greater degree than normal on not only individual experiences and ideas of norms, but also the extent to which viewers have internalised idealising conventions concerning how (mainstream) film portrays humans or have been able to break away from the mainstream's conception of people. Thus, the conceptualisation and artefact qualities of characters in independent realism depicts people as complex, fundamentally incomprehensible, morally ambiguous, emotionally diffuse, and subject to inner and outer compulsions.

In addition to mainstream and independent realism, there are a wide variety of other character conceptions. Some of them differ from the two in that they emphasise the character's artificiality, constructedness, and deviation from reality in various ways. This includes the conceptions of postmodernism and of alienation.



Fig. 31 John Travolta as the gangster Vincent Vega in *Pulp Fiction* invokes the actor's earlier career as singer and dancer. (Dir. Quentin Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction*, 1994, A Band Apart/Jersey Films, USA. All rights reserved.)

Postmodernism

Postmodern and post-classical cinema is generally characterised by a specific combination of four aesthetic strategies: intertextuality, self-referentiality, spectacularity/aestheticisation, and anti-conventionality through deconstructive narrative techniques (Eder 2002b). In many varieties of postmodern film, these strategies also affect their characters, which are often highly stylised, exaggerated, and inspired by the stereotypes of a popular mythology. Most postmodern characters are not designed to be personalities that are as 'real' as possible, and instead openly show that they embody genre conventions. They behave according to overdrawn clichés taken from other films rather than reality. Some postmodern characters reflect, transpsychologically, the genre conventions that determine their own behaviour. This can be seen quite clearly in *Scream*, in which characters are horror film fans and remind us of the 'don'ts' of the genre.

In this case, significant portions of the characters' behaviour are not 'realistic'. That is, their actions are not motivated in terms of folk psychology, but rather through cinematic conventions or intertextual references such as the actors' past roles. This is especially conspicuous in *Pulp Fiction*, where Vincent Vega behaves like a combination of a typical contract killer, a caricature of one, and John Travolta's star persona. Viewers are not only conscious of this fact, recognising the artificiality and the references represents the lion's share of their enjoyment. Since metanarrative and genre stereotypes are just as important as folk-psychology in grasping the characters, the terms 'transparency' or 'opacity' are only partially applicable to some postmodern characters. Their inner lives are obvious, but extremely 'flat' at the same time.²²

The nature of postmodern intertextuality can often be recognised on the basis of individual aspects such as the actors' performances. For example, in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, Jennifer Jason Leigh quotes and combines the acting styles of various actresses in 1930s screwball comedies (Schweinitz 2000). Films such as *Pulp Fiction* and *Wild at Heart* demonstrate the extent to which individual identity is a product of cultural and media influences. In their hair and clothing styles, behaviours, i.e., on the level of what is represented and within the represented world, characters orient themselves according to patterns that viewers can recognise as stereotypes taken from outside the diegetic world. A snakeskin jacket similar to the one that Sailor (Nicolas Cage) repeatedly terms a sign of his 'individuality' in *Wild at Heart* was already worn by Marlon Brando in *The Fugitive Kind*, which indicates the limits and sources of this 'individuality'.

22 One could apply Peter Wuss' PCS model (structures that are guided by perception, cognition, and stereotypes; 2009) here and point out that in postmodern film mental processes guided by concepts or perception are complemented and overlaid by an especially powerful level of comprehension guided by media (stereo)types.

Postmodern intertextuality not only displays these conventions, it violates and ironises them at the same time. In the narrative twists and turns of *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino develops a panorama of US pop culture in which characters from various gangster subgenres meet and move through the scenarios of Hong Kong, boxer, disco, and Vietnam films. The stereotypes are overdrawn and semantically charged by the actors' past roles, and they are also put into contexts where they do not fit. Genre guerrillas enter foreign soil that defamiliarises them. In one of the stories of *Pulp Fiction*, Vincent Vega is a caricature of a cold-blooded killer, in another the lover of the girlfriend of a gangster boss, and in a third a minor character who can casually be blown away. The characters can be treated with irony because their conventionality and status as contingent cultural constructions are made evident.

This kind of self-referentiality, maintaining awareness of the fact that a character is being constructed, normally diminishes viewers' sympathetic and empathetic involvement (see Chapter 14). In many cases, a relationship between viewers and characters develops that combines the empathetic taking of sides with a feeling of superiority and ironic distancing. Sailor and Lula in *Wild at Heart*, Jeff Lebowsky in *The Big Lebowski*, and the hapless criminals in *Fargo* are examples of characters that unconsciously model themselves on and live out clichés, while viewers knowingly register them.

However, in postmodern film, in contrast to most avant-garde films, the anti-illusionistic, distancing, or alienating effect of self-referentiality is balanced against other factors, through spectacular exaggeration, shocks, powerful conflicts, sensational visual appeal, or naturalistic dialogues. The goal is a form of reception that oscillates 'between irony and identification' (Felix 1998: 542), or 'engulfment' as a 'different form of participation' simultaneously mixing immersion in streams of affect with a game with meaning and intertextuality (Elsaesser 1998: 204). The postmodern mode allows viewers both to empathise with the characters to a certain degree and at the same time remain at an ironic distance so as to allow the basic affective mood of distanced amusement to arise, which balances extreme violence with comic relief. Irony restrains emotional sympathy with the characters and diminishes the tension created by the intense stimuli. It also serves as a psychological regulative for shock effects, making them bearable when they become excessive.

Thus, the basic element of postmodern character conception is the foregrounded use of popular genre stereotypes and star images that are alienated, ironic, exaggerated, recombined, and refracted (such as John Travolta's star image as a singer and dancer in *Pulp Fiction*; Figure 31). As a result, postmodern characters are, on the one hand, markedly artificial, stylised, and alienated and typified, some of them transpsychological and transparent in a specific way. Characters' self-referentiality and intertextuality shift attention to the level of their nature as symbols, symptoms, and as an artefact. On the other hand, the use of everyday details, realistic dialogues, conflicts that promote identification, and empathetic moments works against this, resulting in a constant oscillation between modes of reception.

Characters' traits that viewers can ascertain by referring to narrative stereotypes coexist in tension with others established by means of folk-psychological attribution. The characters seem to be hybrids in that they refer to both a coherent imaginary world and their artificiality at the same time. On the basis of one side of this hybrid conception—the emphasis on the nature as an artefact, the realisation of the characters' artificiality and constructedness—one can say that postmodern character conception, in contrast to the two 'realisms' outlined above, only to a limited degree expresses or suggests a conception of human nature. Indirectly, however, the idea might come across that humans, like the characters, are a fragile construct, their identity chiefly cobbled together from cultural clichés, and their behaviours guided by higher structures, rather than autonomous.

Alienation, Stylisation, Fragmentation, Dissolution

In the stylised, emphatically artificial, and puzzling characters of films oriented toward Brechtian *alienation*, humans also seem to be primarily products of sociocultural influences. However, the characters in films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Jean-Luc Godard, Glauber Rocha, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub differ significantly from those of the postmodern, both in terms of the implicit conception of people and the nature and objective of the stylisation and alienation. In the final analysis, this involves a Brechtian character conception (as outlined in Chapter 2): 'To alienate a process or a character means first of all simply to strip the process or the character of its self-evident, familiar, plausible quality and to create astonishment and curiosity about it' (Brecht 1967a, 301). The aim of this method is to gain insight into society: 'The familiar, which can be found around us as something unrecognised, should be made conspicuous not only to make it appear unfamiliar, but beyond that to make it perceptible and known' (Daphinoff 1984: 613). The viewer should be able to recognise the mechanisms and hierarchies of power, the reasons and background, the discursive formatting of human behaviour and social situations; analyse them from a distance, assess, and in the final analysis change them.

Brecht and his successors in theatre and film contrasted the concept of alienation with the 'Aristotelian' (mainstream) principle of empathic and affective involvement with characters. While postmodernism attempts to combine ironic distance and emotionalisation, strategies of alienation seek to replace empathy with 'astonishment and curiosity'. When this happens, stylisation and alienation—again in contrast with postmodern film—do not aim at orienting characters toward popular genre (stereo) types, instead employing various other devices to intentionally disappoint viewers' expectations. The characters are placed in an artificial theatrical context and seemingly unsuitable locations; their speech and physical actions can be diametrically opposed, contradicting each other though they take place simultaneously. The characters' trait systems are set up in an incoherent fashion and have internal contradictions or two

faces, two opposite personalities. The style of their language does not suit them and is artificial. For example, their manner of speaking is rhythmic, flat, and fractured; the style changes abruptly and is full of quotes (Daphinoff 1984: 617–19; Hartmann 2001). Not least, the acting style generates alienation. Actors present their characters with role distance, for example by using a certain speaking style and gestures so that the ‘observer remains conscious of the fact that they are present at a performance’ (Hickethier 2001a: 178–79). The character stands not for an individual, but for a social situation in a general and typical manner, thus showing the fundamental changeability of that situation.

One could also, following Brecht, speak of a conception of a ‘social gesture’ (*sozialer Gestus*). ‘Gesture’ refers to a normed, set sign; ‘social gesture’ denotes performative stylisation and making socially normed behaviour conspicuous, ‘the process in which everyday behaviour is transformed into an object of aesthetic contemplation’ (Kappelhoff 1999: 195). A character’s behaviour is presented in a way similar to a cultural-anthropological exhibit, placed like a specimen on the dissection table of social cognition. Hermann Kappelhoff describes this representational strategy by using Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Katzelmacher* as an example:

The gestural stylisation of the external action does not provide access to the mental internal logic of the characters, but instead isolates and prepares ways of [social] behaviour. [...] Detached from the interior perspective of the acting agent, beyond the illusion of living interaction, [the gesture becomes ostentatious and loses] its character as the expression of living powers of feeling. What remains is the signifying material of a gestural rhetoric of sensations. [...] The film *Katzelmacher* (1969) is a case in point here, where this strategy can already be seen in the source of the drama, Fassbinder’s play of the same name. The dialogue and [scenic constellations] are not structured by the framework of the developing plot, however fragmented it may be. Instead they organise the gestural material in alternating series, distributed according to abstract categories like love affairs or love addiction—or group symmetry and asymmetry. In this way they sketch certain types of affects and construct a register of character types: envious, stingy, reckless, opportunist, daydreamer, calculator, narcissist—these may be used to classify the basic elements that are related in various constellations. (Kappelhoff 1999: 195; 2015: 112)

Such characters exemplify a certain social type, the structures of which are made conspicuous by means of a specific mode of representation (see also Chapter 4 on *The Marriage of Maria Braun*). By way of that, the characters perform an emblematic function in a parable-like narrative; they are stylised, one-dimensional, and typified, but in contrast to postmodern cinema, not media or genre types predominate but social types, brushed against the grain. The characters often resist simple folk-psychological explanations, are in part opaque and incoherent; ‘astonishment and curiosity’ should lead to recognition of their social contingency. Thus, this character conception is linked with an understanding of individuals as products of social structures, and it explains their behaviour as the result of acquired patterns and social situations. Individuals are not unique, neither in the conscious nor

unconscious, as character traits and behaviours they share with others predominate. While Brecht aims more at raising the level of economic awareness, the acting style in Fassbinder's films 'lays bare the emotional theatre of desire through everyday behaviour' (Kappelhoff 1999: 195). Thus, in this case the social gesture relates primarily to other social structures, those of love and its cruelties, conventions, and hierarchies of power.

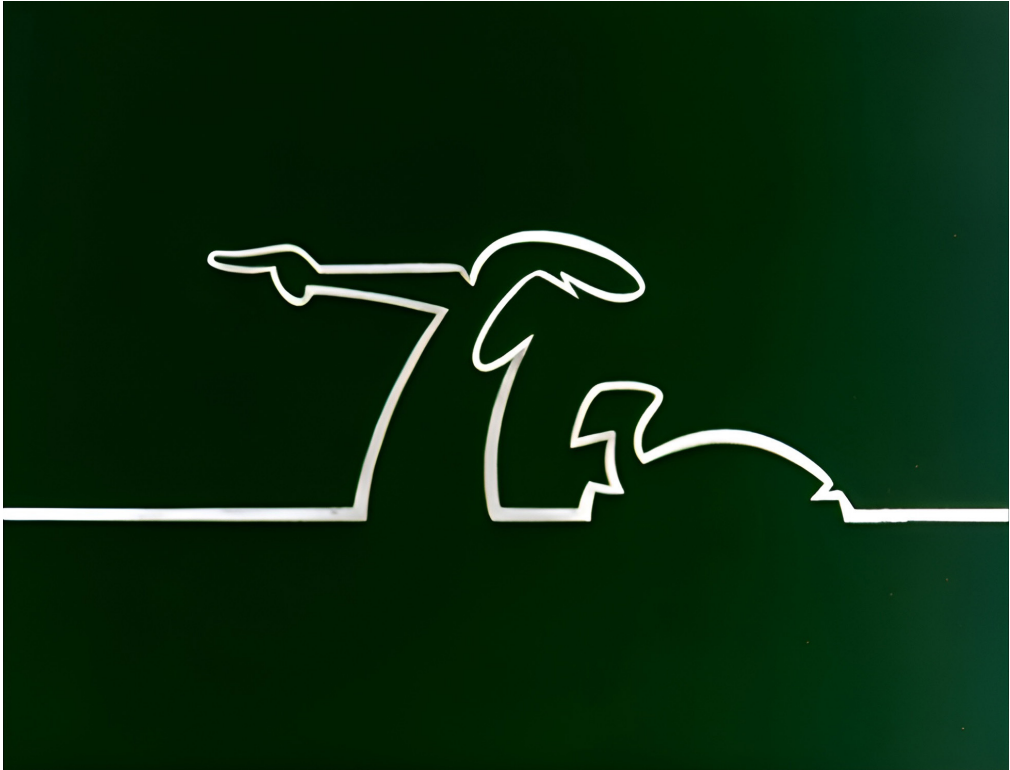


Fig. 32 The extremely stylised protagonist of Osvaldo Cavandoli's animated series *La Linea*. (Dir. Osvaldo Cavandoli, *La Linea*, 1971–83, B. Del Vita/Telecip-Belokapi/Wagner-Hallig Film/Quipos srl, Italy. All rights reserved.)

Of course, there are numerous other character conceptualisations, often associated with certain genres, such as animation or comedy, or with art movements like surrealism or Dada. Some animation films, such as Osvaldo Cavandoli's series *La Linea* (Italy, 1971–83) use extremely stylised, minimalist, and therefore deliberately simple and one-dimensional characters (Figure 32). Other films aim to fragment or completely deconstruct characters (see Heidbrink 2005). The absurd behaviour of surrealist characters does not allow for any conclusive explanations (see Chapter 9). Animated films often play with such possibilities and self-reflexively emphasise the constructed nature of their characters, for example through forms of narrative metalepsis or mise-en-abyme in which the

characters interact with their (supposed) creators, such as Daffy Duck in *Duck Amuck*, who is constantly being transported into new environments, physically deformed, or almost erased by his animator (Figure 20). Another example is the title character of the novel *Il cavaliere inesistente* / *The Nonexistent Knight* (Italo Calvino, 1959) and the animated film based on it (Pino Zac 1970). The noble knight consists only of an empty suit of armour, held together by the sheer will to fulfil his knightly duties. When this is no longer necessary, the armour collapses and with it the character.

In summary, it can be said that character conceptions—constellations of artefact qualities—are influenced by the aims, assumptions, and ideas of humanity of various modes of film practice, e.g., entertainment-oriented mainstream film or independent art film.

Mainstream realism is the dominant conception. Mainstream characters are meant to be individual, autonomous, multidimensional, dynamic, transparent, easily understood, consistent, and dramatic. Mainstream film conveys an image of humans that represents them as being active, conscious, rational, emotional, morally principled, coherent, and autonomous, and whose lives are determined by their personalities rather than their external circumstances. Characters in independent realism are more opaque and ambivalent, more difficult to understand, not as dramatic, and more static, inconsistent, and passive. They convey an image of humans as being fundamentally incomprehensible, morally ambiguous, emotionally diffuse, complex, and incoherent, at the mercy of internal and external compulsions, their lives determined by their unconscious. Postmodern character conception is characterised by artificiality, exaggeration, refracted genre stereotypes, and 'flat' transparency. Such characters are, in part, transpsychological and point out the fact that human identity is a (media) construct. Characters in the Brechtian cinema of alienation are stylised, one-dimensional, socially typified, intentionally artificial in the sense of a 'social gesture', and partially opaque and incoherent. Humans seem to be products of social structures or dispositifs.

This preliminary typology could be deepened by means of additional examination, which would add more character conceptions: from the absurd characters of surrealist films that act incomprehensibly or irrationally, through the variety of avant-garde conceptions aimed at innovation and provocation, to characters that are difficult if not impossible to comprehend due to their logically contradictory natures, such as in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* / *Last Year at Marienbad*. Some interesting subjects for future investigation would be the historical development of character conceptions, the differences between main and secondary characters, and the occurrence of certain character conceptions in various genres.

8.3 Conclusion and an Example: Sensory Qualities, Dramatic Composition, and Structures of Characters as Artefacts in *Casablanca*

The two preceding chapters showed that, as artefacts, characters are no less complexly structured than as represented beings. Now I will summarise the central results and illustrate them with an example. Through forms of representation and the distribution of information, films guide the viewers' experience and shape characters' physicality, psyche, and sociality; their stable traits and fleeting states; and their present, past, and future. Both cinematic representation and what is represented convey character-related information. A variety of stylistic devices give the flow of sounds and images a concrete form, present the character's external features, and thus make it possible to draw conclusions about what we cannot directly perceive, that is, about the character's personality, inner life, relationships, extradiegetic past and future. Both levels of character-related information—in what is represented and in the form of representation—also contribute to our expectations and invite further hypotheses about the character as symbol and symptom. In the previous chapters, various categories that can aid systematic investigation of the aspects of character construction and design were compiled:

- *Filmic devices and techniques* present the character concretely through sound and moving images (in contrast to literature and other media). Media and narrative contexts, naming, casting, star image, acting style, mise-en-scene, camerawork, sound design, and editing all contribute to this. These elements create sounds and images with particular formal-aesthetic features, phenomenological qualities, and levels of intensity, contrasts, and similarities. They bring forth character-related images with a concrete spatiality, expressive shapes, compositions of light and colours, textures, movements, and rhythms; as well as character-related sounds of a certain volume, frequency, materiality, pitch, spatial location, and temporal development.
- *The distribution of character information* in the film creates a dramatic structure that has effects on character synthesis and affective responses such as suspense, curiosity, and surprise. Decisive in this context is, firstly, how information with various functions and degrees of relevance, modality, directness, and reliability is provided through the film's sign systems and mechanisms of communication and perspectivisation. And secondly, how this character information is arranged in the film structurally: in terms of amount, duration, frequency, density, order, and contextualisation as well as relations of redundancy, complementarity, or discrepancy. The film's characterisation strategies can facilitate, hamper, or even prevent the construction of a consistent character model.

- In the course of a film, relevant character information often clusters in certain *types of sequences*, which makes them particularly important for characterisation. In addition to the film's exposition and conclusion, this involves long dialogue scenes; culmination points of action and decision-making; scenes of empathy, crisis, and change; scenes showing behaviour that is typical or that deviates from social norms and values; and character-oriented digressions. Both the characters themselves and the viewers' character models can change in various ways in the course of such phases; however, that need not take place congruently, so that at a certain moment characters can *seem* different to us than they actually are in the fictional world.
- The devices and methods used for filmic character portrayal lead viewers to construct character models of a certain kind and structure. On the basis of this structure, they judge characters as constructs according to certain *artefact qualities*, above all their degrees of realism, (stereo)typification, complexity, consistency, transparency, dimensionality, and dynamism.
- The qualities of characters as artefacts often form typical constellations: *character conceptions* that serve as guidelines for character construction in cinematic modes such as mainstream and independent realism, postmodernism, and alienation. Aesthetic and critical assessments of characters are ultimately based on these conceptions and artefact qualities.

The extent to which the above categories can aid systematic examination of how characters are designed and shaped in film will be shown using the now familiar example of Rick Blaine. Since he is one of the best-known heroes in classical Hollywood cinema, one would expect that he conforms to the character conception of mainstream realism and is designed to be multidimensional, dynamic, transparent, easily understood, consistent, and dramatic. A closer look at his features will show, however, that this is not entirely true, suggesting a few interesting differentiations.

The basic features of Rick's physicality, psyche, sociality, and conduct have already been sketched in previous chapters. Various aspects of his physicality stand out, including his 'masculine' attractiveness, the size of his expressive face, the calmness, presence, and energy of his body language, the distinctiveness and sharpness of his voice, and the economy of his facial expressions. In the area of sociality, Rick is set apart, among other things, by his high status and the complexity of his role set. At first, Rick's most important relationships can be found within the microcosm of his café. Then his love for Ilsa and respect for his rival, Victor Laszlo, involve him in an inner conflict of values pitting his sense of responsibility against his passion, which in the end results in him sacrificing his regained love and taking on a whole new position in the social fabric. Taking a look at Rick's inner life and personality shows that this conflict represents an essential part of the motivations for Rick's actions later in the

film and drives a psychological development from melancholy and coldness at the beginning to his inner struggle with Ilsa and himself, and then to a redefinition of his emotionality and identity.

This preliminary analysis barely touched on the techniques and devices of characterisation. The categories presented above now permit more precise recognition of how the film stages Rick, presents his physicality, psyche, and sociality, and guides viewer reactions. Most generally, it can be said that nearly all of the film's sequences convey information about him. He is either visible or other characters talk about him. Regarding duration and density of the distribution of information, Rick dominates the film far more than any other main character, including Ilsa. Some information about Rick is emphasised by repetition and representation on different levels (frequency), among other things his status, coolness, and power, others' respect for him, his mysterious past, the question of whether he is a cynic or in fact an idealist, his disappointed love for Ilsa, and his suffering and bitterness. Information is provided through various levels of narration and communication. The multi-perspective editing is based on an authorial narrative situation without explicit (voice-over) commentary. Subjective shots render perceptions from Rick's point of view, and the flashback gives us his memories. Most of the information about Rick is, however, conveyed through visual depiction of his behaviour and through other characters' dialogue. Others talk about him repeatedly while Rick himself is silent or gives monosyllabic answers, or they contribute to his characterisation in other ways, such as through their behaviour toward him (context, characterisation by others). At the same time, characterisation is at times unreliable and often discrepant. From the very beginning, there is a contradiction between several different sources: Rick's characterisation by other characters who love or admire him (Renault, Ugarte, his employees), his spoken self-characterisation as a cynic and egotist ('I stick my head out for nobody'), his controlled and melancholy body language and facial expressions, and his inconsistent and changing behaviour (from humiliating Yvonne to helping Laszlo and the Bulgarian couple).

Casablanca has an extensive amount of dialogue in which multi-layered character traits, values, relationships, and conflicts are addressed repeatedly (mode of givenness). However, not all the information can be believed (reliability). Certain characters, such as Ugarte and Renault, tend toward flattery, while Rick understates matters. Above all, there is a constant necessity for self-control, secrecy, and pretence, since most conversations take place in public areas such as the café, markets, and offices. Rick, Ilsa, and Laszlo run into each other constantly, and their love triangle is not the only reason that these characters avoid plain statements and employ subtexts for a great deal of their communication. Laszlo is not supposed to learn anything about Ilsa's past; Ilsa and Rick want to avoid exposing each other; Laszlo's activities as a resistance member must be kept hidden from Strasser; Rick keeps his plan a secret from the others; etc.

Neither the images of external appearance, with ambiguous, dissimulated, or controlled facial expressions, nor the dialogues with their allusions, presumptions, and ironic turns of phrase convey clear information about the characters' central motives, relationships, or nuances of feelings and personalities. Just general hints in a certain direction are obvious, though they remain underdetermined and require inferences by the viewers. Rick is admired—but why? He has had an eventful past—but what are the details? There was something going on between Rick and Ilsa—but what? Rick and Ilsa reconcile and are still in love—but do they sleep with each other? Rick acts according to a plan—but what is it? Although information is divulged in a somewhat obvious and redundant way, it produces intentional ambiguity, above all in regard to the characters' inner lives and social relationships. The development of Rick's character and the viewers' development of a mental model of him run parallel for the most part, but the model remains underdetermined in regard to decisive questions of character, emotion, and motivation. For quite some time, the viewers cannot be certain why Rick is so bitter; while Rick's escape plan is being put into effect, they do not know his intentions and thus do not grasp the change in his personality until the film's ending.

Looking at the *order* in which information is provided about Rick in certain phases shows how the character is developed in a structured way within the film's drama. The general situation is outlined—the refugees in Casablanca, Strasser's arrival—and then Rick's exposition in absentia begins with indications from Renault, Strasser, and the café employees. This individual is interesting and important, but we know virtually nothing about him. As a result, we eagerly await Rick's initial appearance on screen, which then underlines his introverted melancholy, cool self-confidence, and social power. At the same time, the staging develops micro-suspense in many different ways. At first, we see nothing more than Rick's hand and the flourish of his signature, then the camera pans to his face, his hand putting a cigarette in his mouth. Rick's subsequent interactions with Ugarte, Sam, Ferrari, Yvonne, the barkeeper, and Renault mostly involve dialogue. They complete the delayed exposition in condensed form and suggest a possible conflict—Rick is given the letters of transit to hide—while the protagonists' positions are not clear. The film continues to circle around the question 'Who is Rick?' more than others, such as 'What will he do with the letters of transit?' Furthermore, the answers to the first question are ambiguous and contradictory. The information provided is so diffuse and discrepant that, despite all the time and effort spent on Rick until the middle of the film, neither his character nor his motives and conflict are completely clear or can be understood with certainty. This is uncommon for a Hollywood film, because character-related curiosity rather than plot-related suspense determines the viewers' reactions. By the time Ilsa and Laszlo enter Rick's café, thirty minutes have already passed. And even after that, the focus is not on whether Rick will give them the letters of transit or not, because the question of what connects Ilsa and Rick and how their relationship will develop is more important. Once again, this is answered in part by Rick's episode of drunken despair, the flashback showing his

memories, and the argument with Ilsa. While Ingrid Bergman's 'innocent' appearance and star image allow us to conclude that Rick's attacks are unfair, the reason she left him remains unclear. Rick is obviously unhappy because he loved Ilsa and she rejected him, but what is the nature of his unhappiness, to what extent is it influenced by Rick's personality, and how could it be healed?

The subsequent sequences shift the threat faced by Ilsa and Laszlo, their loyalty, and their unsuccessful attempts to obtain the letters of transit into the foreground. During this phase, we learn little about Rick, mostly just details relating to his relationship with Ilsa and Laszlo. On the one hand, he refuses to give them the letters of transit, and his motives are once again unclear. Does he want revenge on Ilsa? Is this an attempt to win her back? Or does he just want to gain time and clarity? After that, his behaviour changes significantly. He makes sacrifices and takes risks, allows the Bulgarian to win at roulette, and risks closure of his café by helping Laszlo drown out the singing Germans with 'La Marseillaise'. Rick's refusal to give Ilsa and Laszlo the letters of transit and his contradictory behaviour clearly indicate an inner conflict. He is obviously his own main opponent. But this makes more urgent the question of the precise nature of this inner conflict and its solution.

Somewhat later, Ilsa goes to Rick's apartment, demands the letters of transit, threatens him with a pistol, and after his refusal, tearfully admits that she still loves him. They kiss, and Ilsa explains why she had to leave him. She then asks Rick to decide for both of them. This climactic scene provides contradictory evidence as to whether Ilsa and Rick have sex, leaving both interpretations open (see Maltby 1996). However, it answers various viewer questions concerning their relationship and Rick's inner life. 'It's still a story without an ending' (Rick), but from this point on, Rick's diffuse inner problem turns into a relatively unambiguous conflict between love and moral duty. Rick becomes active. What he decided, the plan he will put into action, and the extent to which his character has changed is, however, not revealed. This creates suspense for a brief period: how will he resolve his inner conflict? Will he turn Laszlo in so he can have Ilsa to himself? The famous farewell scene at the airport, during which Rick enables Ilsa and Laszlo to escape and remains behind, finally resolves the inner conflict. The objective is not only to create empathy; the lengthy dialogue also reveals Rick's motivations, which had remained hidden to this point, and answers the question concerning his true character. At the same time, the ambiguous and partially contradictory information leaves a great deal of room for speculation about the precise motives behind his and Ilsa's actions (see Chapter 6 and Chapter 13).

Thus, the dramatic structure of providing and withholding information aims altogether more at character-related curiosity than at plot-related suspense. *Casablanca* is a character-centred film with a complex, vaguely outlined inner conflict. In other words, it violates one of the fundamental rules of mainstream scriptwriting: 'Somebody wants something [very concrete] badly and is having difficulty getting it' (Howard and Mabley 1996: xii; see Chapter 9). On the one hand, Rick's set of artefact qualities

conform to mainstream realism in many regards: he is a combination of familiar types, the tough guy and the disappointed lover, mixed together and complemented with some individual nuances. Although he is idealised and not wholly consistent, he conforms close enough to folk-psychological criteria of plausibility. His behaviour and inner life make him seem multidimensional, and his character changes fundamentally in the course of the film as a result of his growing insight and moral resolve. On the other hand, the opacity and ambiguity of Rick's inner conflict differs from that of a prototypical Hollywood protagonist. His underlying character conception deviates from mainstream realism in this regard, approaching independent realism.

This view is supported by a feature of his media and narrative contexts: *Casablanca* cannot be clearly categorised in a particular genre, and instead triggers associations with a variety of them, such as melodrama, romance, spy story, and adventure story (Smith 2003: 151–68). The film's poster shows Rick and Ilsa facing each other as in a romance. However, Rick wears the typical hat and trench coat of a detective or gangster, and the introductory voice-over narration and the exotic setting also raise expectations of an adventure or spy film. What remains unclear is which character type Rick corresponds to more (lover, spy, adventurer, gangster), which makes his typification more difficult and lays the groundwork for individualisation.

Casablanca's stylistic strategies on the representational level help balance such deviations from the mainstream with the objectives of Hollywood cinema. The name 'Rick Blaine' is an early indication of the character's personality: it sounds brief in a 'masculine' sense, tough, energetic, down-to-earth, pragmatic; 'Ilsa Lund', on the other hand, sounds 'feminine', soft, exotic, and Nordic to US viewers. Mise-en-scene, camerawork, sound design, and editing conform to a great extent to the 'institutionalised mode of representation' and make external action clearly comprehensible, steer attention toward significant details, and inconspicuously increase expressiveness and intensity of experience.

The film's framing and mise-en-scene position the characters in closed compositions. The Moorish architecture marks their lifeworld as exotic and mysterious to the Western audience. The characters are frequently framed by curved archways, which emphasises the closed nature and balance of the image, steers attention to the characters, and can suggest both restriction and protection in the café (Nielsen 2002). Most shots are medium shots or medium close-ups with more than one character (two, three, four shots), and closer shots are often employed as part of point-of-view editing showing interactions. Rick gets the most close-ups. The low-key lighting in many shots emphasises his distinctive facial features, sometimes creating dramatic shadows. While this strengthens the impression of emotional intensity, the rather static framing underlines his self-control. Ingrid Bergman is also frequently shown in close-ups—relatively close and relatively long in duration—but they emphasise the perfection and delicacy of her face by means of make-up, soft focus, and brighter lighting (in Hollywood's typically gendered manner) (Figure 33).



Fig. 33 *Casablanca*: after Ilsa Lund's emotional outburst in Rick's apartment, her beauty is emphasised by soft focus, glamour lighting, backlight on her hair, and pinpoint spotlight on her eyes. (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.)

In the course of the film and as the conflicts intensify, the brightness decreases as a whole. The lighting on the characters darkens, and their framework of light, curving backgrounds is replaced by dark, rectangular framing in the foreground. Put behind windows or railings, they seem hemmed in or observed. Camera, sound design, and editing focus the attention on Rick and Ilsa's relationship, making both characters stand out from their environment and creating a space for their interaction, whereas other characters, Victor Laszlo in particular, are placed in the background. This is most obvious in the farewell scene. While significant visual axes are established between Rick and Ilsa, other characters disappear from their field of view, stand behind them, or leave the scene, are marginalised in the frame, or cut out of the picture completely in close-ups. The visual focus on Rick and Ilsa and the leitmotif 'As Time Goes By' suggest that the lovers are concentrating on each other and allude to their intense feelings, though neither precisely which feelings are involved nor the nature of their love is revealed.

The previously mentioned ambivalence of motives, feelings, and personality traits are simultaneously deepened and made plausible through the casting of Humphrey Bogart (see Riis 2002), which gives Rick his expressive face and characteristic sonorous,

nasal voice. Particularly in his first appearances early in the film and when interacting with Ingrid Bergman, who is taller, use of perspective and inconspicuously raising Bogart's position makes him look bigger. His star image categorises Rick as a certain male type: before *Casablanca*, Bogart had played tough gangsters and then detectives in a morally questionable world; afterward, the roles he played underwent a change. Contemporary audiences, familiar with Bogart as a tough guy, presumably considered Rick even more unpredictable than modern viewers, who already associate the actor more strongly with the emotional lover.

While Bogart's acting style is 'realistic' and narratively integrated, it does have some peculiarities. According to the Hollywood studio style of performance predominant at the time, we would expect Bogart to play Rick as a tough guy in accordance with his star image. However, Rick is characterised mainly through the interplay of other factors. His characterisation by others through their dialogue and behaviour suggests that he has earned their love and respect and is in fact an idealist. Rick's self-characterisation and actions early in the film ('I stick my neck out for nobody') depict him, however, as a cynic who feels sympathy for no one and as a misogynistic egotist. Bogart's acting style mediates between these contradictory impressions, which make the viewer curious about Rick's 'true character' and provide an opportunity to generate consistency. As suggested in Chapter 6, Rick's, or Bogart's, body language stands out due to a calm though energetic presence; his facial expressions, on the other hand, are minimalistic: a sad or unmoving face, turning away from conversational partners, glances into the distance, vague suggestions of a sarcastic smile. This could be termed underacting—or *overacting* to express the melancholy coolness and bitterness reflected in everyday life by minimal expression. Three times at least, Bogart breaks with this overacted underacting to suggest that his tough façade conceals an emotional man: Rick's sentimental outburst while drunk, his expression of near disbelief when Ilsa admits that she still loves him, and when saying goodbye to her with a loving and intense gaze. Thus, the contradiction between Rick the cynic and Rick the idealist is eliminated by means of Bogart's acting style, which on the one hand shows the sadness behind his toughness and coolness, and on the other balances his depressive facial expressions by means of confident body language. In this way, Bogart conveys the concise, even idealised expression of the melancholy, self-righteousness, and loneliness resulting from rejection by a loved one. Johannes Riis (2002) points out that Humphrey Bogart aimed at a realistic acting style and—in the same way as Method actors in later years—made use of his own emotional experiences to help him express the character's feelings. Rick's 'masculine' posture, a combination of coolness and sentimentality, complements Ilsa's character in the staging of the gender roles. Ingrid Bergman's star image of an honest, natural, innocent woman—whom Rick blames falsely—puts much more emphasis on her uncertainty and the cracks in her emotional control. Together, these manners of representation deepen the image of the characters' unnecessary estrangement as the result of a misunderstanding.

Through the change in mood, the ending of *Casablanca* once again clearly shows the power that filmic representational strategies have over how viewers experience characters. By staying behind with Captain Renault, Rick demonstrates seriousness, but not deep sadness; his expression seems rather relieved. Bogart decreases the degree of his performative naturalism and adapts to the interplay with Claude Rains (Renault), which was previously more burlesque than realistic. Almost immediately after Rick's emotional farewell from Ilsa and the dramatic shootout with Major Strasser, the dialogue changes to humorous wordplay and witticisms; the music switches from the 'As Time Goes By' leitmotif to the triumphal 'La Marseillaise'; the previously gloomy fog seems to be illuminated by the runway lights; the camera connects the new friends, Rick and Renault, in a two shot and makes an elegant, sweeping crane movement behind and over them as they walk off together. In this way, the use of representational techniques makes it easier for viewers to break away from the moving farewell, assume a liberated, more distanced attitude, and leave the theatre in an elevated mood.

In the following chapters on character motivations and constellations and on viewers' affective involvement, a crucial feature of the character Rick that is suggested here—the complex, ambiguous inner conflict—will be examined in more detail and its emotional effect will be examined.

8.4 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions about Artefact Qualities and Character Conceptions

1. Which general artefact qualities does the character possess (as a result of the structures of the viewers' mental model)?

- Is the character more individualised or typified? If the latter, does it conform to a cross-cultural archetype, a culturally specific social type, a distorting social stereotype, or a functional media type? To what extent does it conform to these types, and where does it deviate from them? How can the typification be assessed? (See also the checklist for analysing social stereotypification at the end of Chapter 10.)
- Is the character realistic or non-realistic? Which idea of realism does it correspond to? Which traits and manners of representation create the impression of its realism? In what way does the character deviate from common ideas of realism? Is it intentionally alienated, stylised, or unintentionally unrealistic, and in which logical, physical, psychological, or social regard?
- What other artefact qualities does the character possess? Is it coherent or incoherent; closed or open? Does it possess contradictory traits or are there any conspicuous gaps, does it raise major questions or enigmas?

- Is it simple or complex, one-dimensional or multidimensional? What are its central trait dimensions? To what extent do these dimensions suggest other traits, and to what extent do they deviate from familiar character types?
 - Does the character undergo change, is it dynamic? Or does it remain basically unchanged and static?
 - Can its inner life and personality traits be inferred? Is it transparent or does it remain opaque?
 - Is it set up psychologically or transpsychologically? Exemplifying, symbolic, allegorical (for more detail, see Chapter 11)?
2. How can the general conception of the character be described?
- How are the character's artefact qualities combined into a systematic pattern (e.g., unrealistic + complex + incoherent + open + symbolic)? Does this pattern conform to that of a common, conventionalised character conception of certain modes of media practice?
 - Can the character conception be categorised as belonging to mainstream realism, independent realism, postmodernism, or alienation?
 - Does the character conform to a different conception, perhaps even a new one?
3. Which aesthetic principles and ideas of humanity provide the basis of the artefact qualities and the character conception and are expressed by them (see Chapter 11)? Did the character contribute to shaping certain (new) conventions of representation or ideas of the human?

PART V: CHARACTERS IN CONTEXT: MOTIVATION, ACTION, AND CONSTELLATION



Fig. 34 The main characters in *Imitation of Life*. From left to right: Annie (Juanita Moore), Lora (Lana Turner), and Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner). (Dir. Douglas Sirk, *Imitation of Life*, 1959, Universal-International, USA. All rights reserved.)

Part V

In the previous chapters, we have looked at characters first as represented beings and then as artefacts. This part combines both perspectives and expands them by examining the relationships of individual characters to their contexts, especially to action/plot (*Handlung*), conflict, and character constellation. Considered more generally, in each of their four aspects, characters are embedded in a specific context (see Diagram 18): as represented beings, they belong to a world with certain spaces, events, and social systems. As artefacts, they are part of filmic or textual structures and strategies and fulfil different aesthetic, narrative, and other functions in them. As

symbols, they contribute to the themes, overarching messages, and deeper meanings of the film. As symptoms, they are embedded in systems and situations of production and reception in which they are shaped by cultural creators, sociocultural conditions, media environments, and intertextual relations, and in which they have effects on audiences and society.

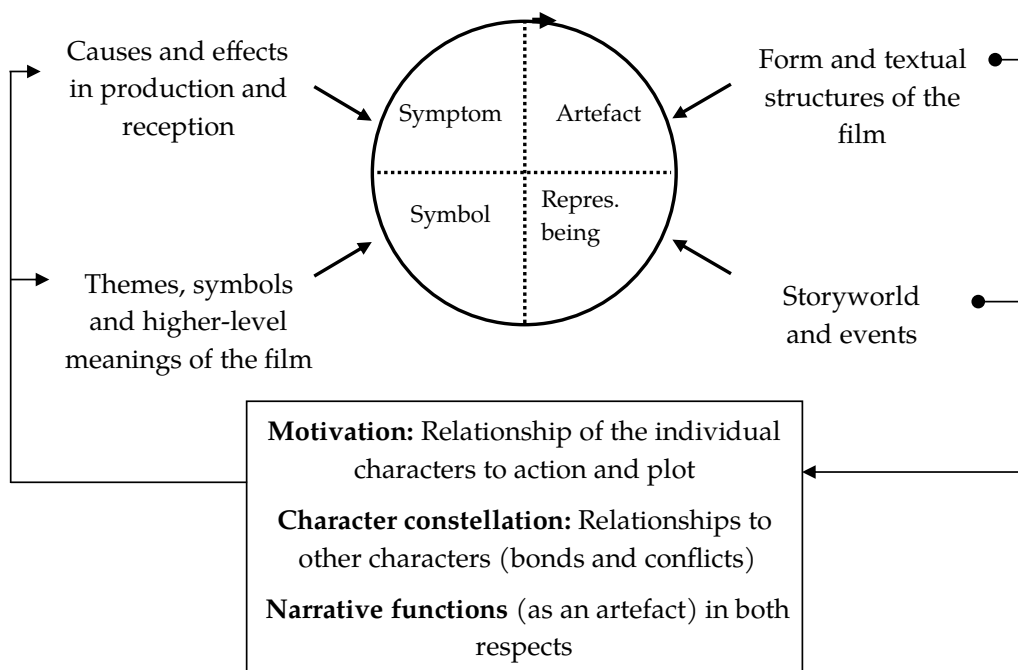


Diagram 18 Different contexts of the individual character as artefact, represented being, symbol, and symptom, and their dominant interrelations

In *Casablanca*, for example, Rick Blaine interacts in various ways with other characters like Ilsa, Renault, or Strasser, and with the spaces, events, objects, and laws of his environment. As an artefact, he fulfils various textual functions, for instance narrative ones as a protagonist who drives the plot or aesthetic functions through the bodily nuances of Bogart's acting. As a symbol, he contributes to the film's general message about love, politics, and personal integrity. And as a symptom, he makes us think about the filmmakers' intentions (such as the Warner brothers' political stance) or about effects on past and present viewers. Knowledge of such contexts exercises an influence when we develop character models: we do not perceive characters in isolation, but always in relation to the storyworld, to other formal elements of the film, to other bearers of meaning, and to causes and consequences in reality.

Since the contextual relationships of characters are quite diverse, the following chapters focus on two selected areas of particular importance. In Chapter 9, the area of motivation and behavioural explanation, already touched upon in Chapter 6, is examined in more detail and linked to the structures of narrative action and plot.

Concepts from psychology, philosophy, and poetics can contribute to a more precise description of motivation. A fundamental difference is to be made here between the diegetic motivation of the character as a represented being and its non-diegetic motivation as an artefact. Moreover, various forms of diegetic motivation of actions can be distinguished in terms of characters' needs or goals, their relations to others or groups, their altruism or egoism. The basic motives and values of the characters form the core of their personality and identity and thus also of narrative arcs and themes, and therefore are essential for their interpretation and evaluation.

Motivation is also a decisive factor within the character constellation, in which the individual characters stand in a network of relationships to each other (Chapter 10). As represented beings, individual characters are parts of social systems; as artefacts, they are parts of textual structures. Characters are positioned as main or secondary figures in a hierarchy of attention and importance, as protagonists or antagonists in interactions and conflicts, as heroes or villains in a value system, and as parallel or contrasting characters in formal comparison to one another. There are typical patterns for such character constellations, from one-person films to ensemble films, and typical changes of such patterns. A character's position within their dynamic networks, for instance their initial isolation and later inclusion in certain groups (such as families or gangs), contributes much to characterisation and thematic meanings. Like characters' motives, their positions within a constellation are also important for understanding them as symbols and symptoms, which will be discussed later in Part VI.

9. Motivation and Plot: Characters' Needs, Goals, and Actions

So, the most important component of a screenplay is character, and the most important aspect of character is motivation. (Frensham 1996: 87)

Represented beings are characterised by their physical, mental, and social traits and behaviour. Their psyche—fleeting inner life and stable personality traits—can be organised according to the four aspects of perception, cognition, emotion, and motivation (see Chapter 6). Motivation, in a psychological sense, includes all short-term or long-term, conscious or unconscious inner processes, causes, and reasons that trigger, maintain, and guide behaviour, including goals, plans, intentions, decisions, wishes, feelings, needs, drives, values, instincts, and other kinds of motives.¹ Whenever perceptions, cognitions, and emotions contribute to behaviour, they become part of motivation. We explain characters' behaviour by attributing a certain motivation to them and expect certain behaviours when we are aware of their motivation (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 6). Often, however, the attribution of a motivation is difficult or uncertain, either because there is no discernible motive or because several alternative interpretations are possible, as in the case of Maria Braun (see Chapter 4).

Motivation is a particularly important aspect of represented beings for a variety of reasons. It is the interface between character and action: as a rule, characters' behaviour, particularly their intentional actions, function as the driving force in the film's story and the focus of its plot (see Chapter 1). Moreover, motivation ensures coherence of the character's traits by connecting corporeality, psyche, sociality, and behaviour and by linking external actions with internal processes, both of which are often social in nature. Furthermore, a character's motives often define their personality core, its crucial traits and behavioural tendencies, thus providing an essential basis for viewers' interpretations and emotional responses (see Chapter 10 and Chapter 13). If Rick Blaine had enabled the escape of Ilsa Lund and her husband not out of noble-mindedness but to finally get rid of them, we would react differently to his behaviour.

For these reasons, characters' motivations are decisive for narratives and their meanings. Most narratives involve a conflict that the protagonists must manage or

1 For a common psychological definition of 'motivation', see, for example, Zimbardo and Gerrig 1999: 350.

a problem they must resolve.² Conflicts and problems, again, are the result of the characters' goals: 'Conflict arises when a need/intention/goal (outer motivation) meets an obstacle' (Frensham 1996: 88). An influential screenwriting guide names the following as essential elements of a 'good story':

1. The story is about *somebody* with whom we have some empathy.
2. This somebody wants *something* very badly.
3. This something is *difficult*, but possible to do, get, or achieve.
4. The story is told for *maximum emotional impact* and *audience participation* in the proceedings.
5. The story must come to a *satisfactory ending* (which does not necessarily mean a happy ending). (Howard and Mabley 1996, 45; italics in original)

Most screenwriting manuals propose similar rules as the basis of the typical dramatic structure of the mainstream film (Eder 1999). The essential feature of this form is that a protagonist is involved in a problem-solving process that overarches the film and poses a suspense question to the audience: will the character solve the problem and achieve their goal? The entire plot structure of typical Hollywood films is centred on the protagonists' goals (ibid.; Thompson 1999): in the first quarter of the films, these overarching goals are established. In the second quarter, they are reformulated in the context of inappropriate attempts to find solutions and now appear more urgent and difficult to achieve. In the third quarter, new strategies to reach these goals fail until a crisis leads to a turning point and another re-focused attempt. In the last quarter, the characters do everything they can to achieve their goals until the climax is reached and they either succeed or fail once and for all. The conclusion sums up these results and ends the subplots.

Of course, there are various other narrative forms besides such mainstream plot structures (Eder 1999: 40ff.). Episodic storytelling such as in *Short Cuts* or *Code inconnu/Code Unknown* brings up several different problems and makes viewers ask an equal variety of questions. In the *cinéma du comportement*, such as in the films of Michelangelo Antonioni, the protagonists do not 'want something very badly' in the sense of having clear goals; they are possibly not even aware of their needs and problems, but waver between alternatives and try out various things without settling on one of them. Certain films, such as *Wilhelmsburger Freitag* or *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, extensively portray everyday routines or situations in which the characters have wishes but make no attempt to realise them. But even in such cases, the characters perform at least 'minor actions', and even if these are ephemeral and undramatic, we still attribute motives to them. Surrealist films like

2 Peter Wuss offers a general and systematic account of the concept, structure, and reception of conflicts in film narratives (2009: Chapters 3 and 4).

Un chien andalou fascinate and provoke viewers not least by refusing to provide simple answers to the automatic search for motives behind their characters' absurd actions. In short, characters' motives are of essential importance in almost all film narratives, from the mainstream to the avantgarde and the experimental. Therefore, distinguishing between the various kinds and aspects of motivation, represents a crucial basis for analysing and interpreting films. But recent film and media studies have hardly dealt in detail with the motivation of characters, and instead, other models have become widespread in media practice and criticism, which neglect central findings of media studies. The following overview of some approaches to modelling character motivation will therefore try to close some of those gaps.

9.1 Varieties of Motivation

Psychological and Textual Motivation

Firstly, we must keep in mind how broad the spectrum of possible explanations for a character's behaviour is. The general question concerning motivation concerns why a person does what they do. In regard to characters—in contrast to real people—this question can be answered in two different ways: diegetically, in reference to the characters' psychological motivation, and non-diegetically, in reference to their textual motivation or function as elements of narrative, rhetorical, or aesthetic strategies.³ The latter aspect is rarely considered in psychological studies on characters.

Firstly, we can explain characters' behaviour in *diegetic* terms according to the rules of the storyworld. Depending on specific films and genre, characters may:

- act consciously and as directed by their interests, on the basis of practical rationality (the majority of mainstream films);
- be controlled by past relationship patterns, suppressed wishes, traumas, neuroses, or obsessions ('psychoanalytical' dramas);
- be moved by uncontrollable instincts or affects (werewolf and vampire movies);
- be psychologically impaired, insane, or suffer from dementia (problem films or horror films);
- mechanically perform a role, routine, or habit (slapstick comedies);
- be programmed for a specific behaviour (robot films);
- be forced by others (victims, 'damsels in distress', secondary characters);

³ In reference to text information in general, both Bordwell in film studies and Jannidis in literary studies distinguish between various forms of 'motivation' (Bordwell 1985b: 19ff.; Jannidis 2004: section 6.3). To me, the term 'textual function' seems to be clearer than, for example, Jannidis's equivalent, 'compositional motivation'.

- be guided by supernatural forces, possessed by evil, etc. (zombie, alien, and exorcist films); or
- possess fantastic, unfathomable, or unfamiliar goals and abilities (gods, sorcerers, aliens).

Secondly, however, characters' behaviour could also be explained *non-diegetically* in that they:

- perform narrative functions or fulfil genre requirements (song-and-dance routines in musicals or Bollywood films);
- conform to conventional expectations or narrative stereotypes ('gangsters always do that');
- are intended to have cognitive or emotional effects on the viewers; or
- allude to a real or intertextual model (referring to a celebrity or to another famous character).

Imagine, for example, a fairy-tale film, in which a good fairy helps the hero out of a hopeless situation. Possible diegetic reasons for her doing so might be that she has a helpful nature and magic powers, has helper's syndrome, or is in love with the hero. Non-diegetic explanations, however, might state that this is what good fairies in fairy-tale films normally do, that otherwise the story would be over, that nothing better occurred to the filmmakers, that this created an opportunity to include a spectacular special effect, or that helping others in need is the film's central theme.

In the first case, the character's diegetic, psychological motivation provides an explanation for their behaviour as a represented being. In the second, the character's non-diegetic motivation, or more precisely their *textual function* as an artefact, symbol, or symptom, is explained not by psychological reasons for their behaviour, but by the aesthetic or narrative reasons for its inclusion in the film instead. As shown previously, characters can perform several textual functions (see Chapter 7): they can contribute to setting up the fictional world, plot development, or the impression of realism; create intertextual references; possess an intrinsic aesthetic value; trigger emotions; and convey necessary narrative information as well as higher meanings. Thus, the issue of the textual function of a character's behaviour does not aim at the level of what is represented, but that of production, and is often directed at the creators' motives: Why did they make the character act in such a way?

Folk psychological and textual explanations for the characters' behaviour are not mutually exclusive, but often coexist, interact, or merge. For example, viewers of a Bollywood film may assume that the protagonist suddenly goes into an elaborate song and dance performance because she is in such a boisterous mood, while at the same time being aware that her behaviour is to be expected because of the genre, the star, and the development of the plot (Figure 35).



Fig. 35 The song and dance scenes in Bollywood movies are motivated less by psychology than by film conventions, but do often refer to the characters' inner feelings metaphorically. In *Main Hoon Na*, an auditorium becomes a dramatic landscape in which a student (Shah Rukh Khan) and his chemistry teacher (Suchmita Sen) dance out their love. (Dir. Farah Khan, *Main Hoon Na*, 2005, Red Chillies Entertainment/Venus Movies, India. All rights reserved.)



Fig. 36 In a famous sequence of *Un chien andalou*, a man (Luis Buñuel) slices open the eye of an immobile woman (Simone Mareuil). The surrealist film refuses to give a psychological explanation of its characters' actions, thus leaving us to search for aesthetic, symbolic, or symptomatic answers. (Dir. Luis Buñuel, *Un chien andalou*, 1929, France. Public domain.)

But even when the textual function of the characters is foregrounded or when their behaviour seems absurd, as in surrealist films like *Un chien andalou* (Figure 36), the audience will still always try to ascribe some psychological motives to them. They cannot do otherwise. Because even if they know that the actual reason why the fairy helps the hero is that the filmmakers couldn't think of anything better, or that the cut through the eye in *Un chien andalou* is a provocative emphasis on absurdity and nightmarish illogic, the act of helping or cutting must first be identified as such—otherwise it would just be a series of incomprehensible body movements. Identifying an action, again, already means attributing psychological motives to it, however rudimentary or implausible they may be. Psychological motivation is thus fundamental and indispensable for understanding characters and stories. In most films, viewers focus predominantly on the psychological motives of characters rather than their textual function, which only comes to the fore when no plausible diegetic motive can be found. Therefore, the default mode of understanding most characters is the folk-psychological explanation of their behaviour. What forms can this explanation take?

Facets of Psychological Motivation

Films can invite so many forms of psychological explanation that it is useful to start with a general overview (see also Doležel 1998: 55–61). Basically, we can first distinguish psychologically motivated behaviour from purely physically caused events such as tripping (in slapstick comedies) or becoming ill (in melodramas). Characters' motivated behaviours are of very different kinds and include the *omission* of physical action, as in the failure to render assistance (*I, Daniel Blake*). They can be limited to a moment (a fatal gunshot) or can stretch over time and comprise many sub-actions (a prolonged search for the killer). They can be influenced by external constraints, coincidences, errors, or the failure of tools (the pistol misfires). Many attempts to act do not reach the desired goals (a murder attempt is not a murder).

In the following, I will concentrate on behaviour to which a certain motive is imputed. Its explanation requires answers to five questions (Burke 1969: XV): what was done when and where; who did it; and why was it done? Usually, films depict these aspects only partially or merely suggest them, thus arousing the viewers' curiosity about missing information: What happened that night? Who was the murderer? When did they lie in wait for their victim? In most cases, however, the acting character, time, place, and behaviour are provided explicitly, while their motivation must be inferred. Such attributions of motives can be more or less specific: does the character simply 'want revenge', or do they want 'vengeance against antagonist X for action Y by means of Z because this is the only way to find peace'?

The critical analysis and interpretation of characters often aims at specific, nuanced, and justified reconstructions of their psychological motivation. In this context, it becomes important that human behaviour can be understood as the result of an

interplay of diverse factors. Their complex network is shown in simplified form in Diagram 19. Expanding on the folk psychological explanation outlined in Chapter 5, we can trace an ideal-typical process of the emergence of behaviour, proceeding step by step from general dispositions to concrete triggers for action, or from ultimate to proximate explanations. Films can foreground or downplay any of these motivating factors, thereby suggesting very different explanations of behaviour.

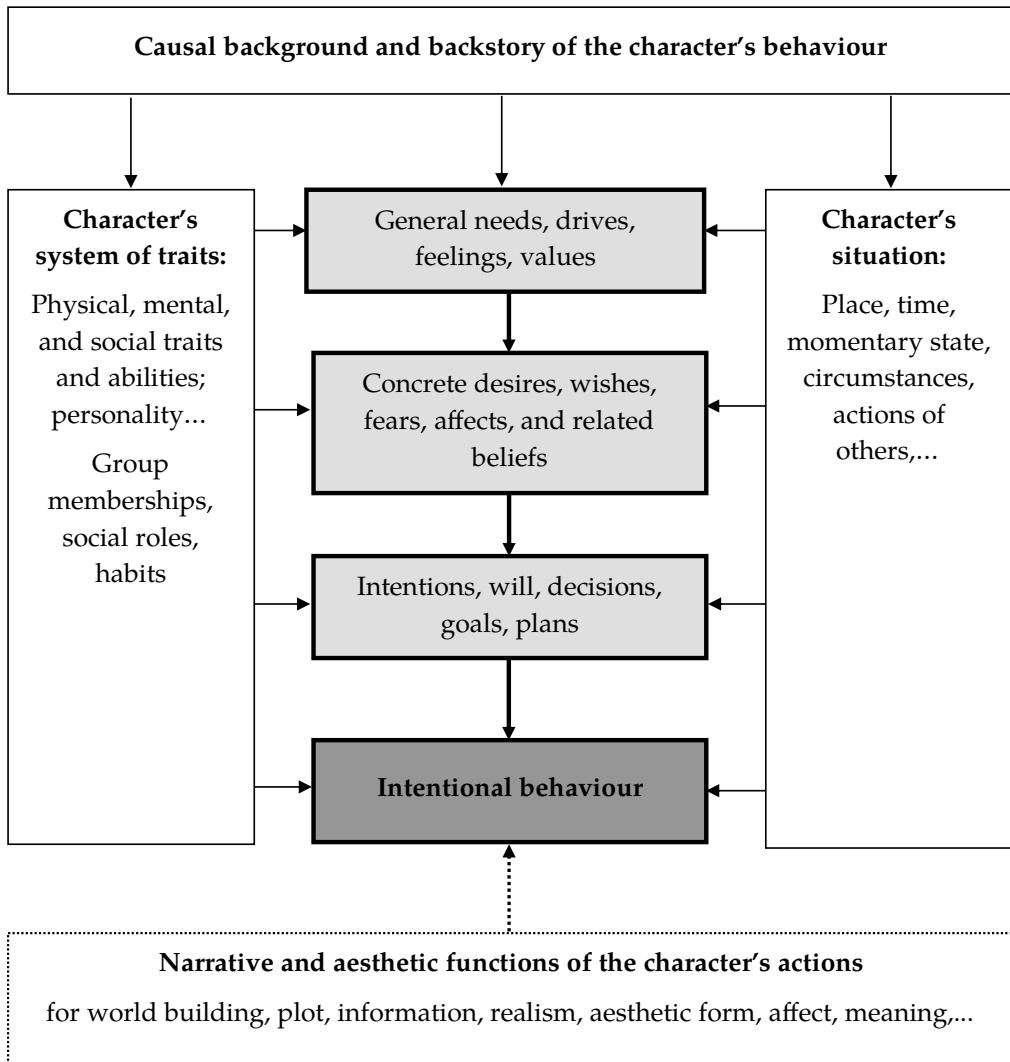


Diagram 19 Aspects of motivation and behavioural explanation: characters' traits, situations, and background influence different levels of psychological motivation

The various concepts of motivation and explanations of behaviour in folk psychology and academic theories of action can be grouped into three levels according to their different degrees of consciousness, concreteness, and controllability. All of them are

closely connected to specific kinds of affects and emotions. I will occasionally subsume all those forms of motivation under the generic term 'motives'.

On a first level lie largely preconscious motives, which shape diffuse behavioural tendencies: needs, drives, instincts, and internalised norms. A need can be defined as a state of deficiency (e.g. lack of food or affection) that can trigger attempts (not necessarily conscious or purposeful) to remedy the deficiency. Needs and the resulting psychological tensions are sometimes explained as the result of drives, instincts or internalised norms. For example, Sigmund Freud's theories posit the sex drive and death drive, biologists assume a set of genetically based instincts, and social-scientific approaches describe various norms and values (see Schwartz 1999, and Chapter 6 of this book). On a second level, agents develop more concrete desires, wishes, fears, and beliefs that prefigure certain behaviour in light of the situation. Wishes and fears are closely linked to values and affects; if someone wishes something, they value it, care and hope for it. On a third level, wishes, fears, and related beliefs bring forth volitional phenomena that lead to more conscious, complex, and deliberate action: intentions, decisions, goals, and plans.⁴ Intention and will imply decisions to realise wishes and pursue goals (see Quante 2002: 176). A goal is a desired future state that the agent considers within reach.⁵ Plans lay down the sub-goals and steps of complex future actions. Importantly, each of these different kinds of motivation also involves different kinds of affective processes, from spontaneous, unspecific bodily core affects at the threshold of consciousness to socio-moral emotions that require complex thoughts about self and others.

All three levels of motivation are shaped by a framework of general factors. Firstly, the permanent dispositions of the agent, particularly their personality, abilities, and social roles (left side of the diagram). There is a fundamental difference here as to whether the character's actions are attributed more to their social roles and circumstances or to their personality. Moreover, as explained in Chapter 6, different models of personality are used to explain motivation, such as that of psychoanalysis or the Big Five dimensions. A second group of factors stems from the immediate situation, such as favourable circumstances in the environment, the availability of tools, or triggering events (right side of the diagram). Thirdly, motivations are based on a certain past history, such as biographical experiences and traumatic memories (top

4 Many philosophers define motives as combinations of desires and beliefs, comprising what the agent believes about the action and its consequences, and the attractiveness of these consequences; see Broad 1971a: 238–39; Beckermann 1985. Psychological conceptions of motivation similarly distinguish between cognitive and conative components of motives, between dispositions to assess the consequences of an action and beliefs about the action and its effects, which may be shaped by certain styles of expectation, action control, and attribution (Asendorpf 1999: 204ff.). In most cases, specifying the wish suffices, and the belief is produced as a result: Why did he do that? Because he wanted something (and was convinced that he could achieve it through the action).

5 According to Mees 1991: 46–47, wishes can involve many different things, and believing that they could ever come true is not required. But when one pursues a goal, believing it is unattainable would be paradoxical. One can wish for world peace with all one's might and still believe that it will never happen. However, someone who works to achieve world peace as a goal normally believes that it is possible.

of the diagram). Films may stress each of these frames for action. Most movies focus on the character's personality or backstory, but there are other options. For instance, films can foreground social roles that enforce behavioural routines on the character: in *Modern Times*, a factory worker—Chaplin—is unable to stop making the motions of tightening screws.

Of course, this model represents merely a simplified, ideal-typical schema of explanations of behaviour, but it makes visible several things that are important for the analysis of characters. Firstly, it clarifies the meanings of key concepts which are regularly used in analysis. For instance, 'need' emphasises a lack that should be filled; 'wish' or 'desire' a preference that need not necessarily be pursued; 'goal' the intended result of a specific action. As we will see, such clarifications help to better understand certain wide-spread approaches in screenwriting, such as the distinction between 'want' and 'need'.

Secondly, the model shows that human behaviour may be shaped by a variety of interacting factors, which can make its explanation rather complicated. Often, viewers or critics attribute a whole *motivation system* to major characters, with various needs, values, affects, goals, or plans that often conflict: the intention to get a good night's sleep would be a plausible motive for going to bed early, but possibly the wish to spend time with friends in the neighbourhood bar is stronger. Concerning the relationship between different motivational levels, fiction theorist Lubomír Doležel distinguishes between four general action types: rational, impulsive, akratic, and irrational (1998: 70–72). Rational action is determined primarily by cognitive motives, reason, conscious decisions, and practical rationality, which includes actions based on adequate emotions or acquired routines, such as braking at a traffic light. Impulsive action, on the other hand, is motivated by reflexes, drives, or spontaneous affects, generally with little or no cognitive reflection. In the case of akratic behaviour, which demonstrates a lack of self-control, the agent knows what should reasonably be done, but still acts differently, giving in to more powerful drives, passions, fears, or desires. Finally, irrational behaviour is almost exclusively determined by unconscious motives that contradict reason.

Thirdly, the model helps to understand how films guide the explanation of characters' actions by foregrounding certain factors of their motivation and downplaying others. Films about a murder, for instance, can either emphasise the perpetrator's perfidious plan or their unsatisfied needs and understandable wishes, their psychopathological personality or their traumatic biography, their uncontrollable drives or the coincidental circumstances of their situation. Characters' wishes and beliefs can also be emphasised; someone can commit a murder because of ruthless sadism, or because they incorrectly believe that this is their only option. As viewers, we would certainly assess the murder differently in each case and react to the murderer with different feelings, ranging from moral disgust to pity.

While some narratives clearly foreground a specific kind of motivation (think of the revenge movie or the social problem film), others provide hints for several

different behavioural explanations simultaneously, thereby opening a wide room for interpretations. Rather than presenting characters' motives explicitly, unambiguously and reliably (e.g., through an auctorial voice-over), they may suggest them only through external appearances and contextual information, thus leaving them ultimately open. Does Hamlet kill his uncle to avenge his father's death, punish his mother, restore justice, satisfy his hatred, rid the kingdom of a pretender to the throne, fulfil his duty as a son—or all of the above? Why does Jeanne Dielman stab her suitor after the sexual act—because he ignored her attempt to interrupt it, because she experienced an unwanted orgasm, because she loses her self-control, or because she wants to break free from her suffocating routine and brutal exploitation in a sexist, patriarchal world? Should Travis Bickle's murderous act of 'liberation' in *Taxi Driver* be explained by referring to his past history as a Vietnam veteran, his sociopathic personality, his isolation in the big city, his narcissistic need for recognition, his plan for saving the girl, or other motives?

Such behavioural explanations are usually influenced by viewers' subjective experiences, their folk theories and other interpretation patterns (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 6). Various film theories each focus on different aspects of the schema of behavioural explanations outlined above (see Chapter 6, Section 3). For example, psychoanalytical theories often try to explain characters' behaviour by referring to their past history, which unconsciously determines their subsequent behaviour in the form of wishes, fantasies, and fears. In contrast, other approaches regard humans as predominantly conscious, practical-rational, interest-guided beings. Thus, a psychoanalyst will come up with very different ideas about a characters' motives than a behaviourist, and an elderly woman's will often differ from a young man's. Even if the film foregrounds some ways of understanding the action, and even if producers' intentions are taken into account, the motives that viewers attribute to characters will often still depend to a great degree on interpretation.

Kinds of Needs, Desires, and Goals

For this reason, it is helpful to define basic general structures that are compatible with motivation theories and make analysis easier. Typologies of motivation make it possible to grasp characters' motives with more precision, describe their structures, analyse them, and compare the constellations of characters' motives in one film, a set of films or different genres. The central questions are: which kinds of motives can characters have and what does that mean for the structure of the film's plot and viewers' reactions? In the following sections, I present a selection of models from psychology, literary studies and practical film poetics that can be applied to characters in film and other media.

In the 1950s, the psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a typology of needs which, although not uncontroversial, is still accepted by many as an important point

of reference and is suitable as a heuristic for character analysis.⁶ Maslow attempts to categorise forms of motivation into eight groups of needs arranged in a pyramid. Until the needs on the lowest four levels of this pyramid are satisfied, they tend to have higher priority than those on the higher levels:

- physiological needs to breathe, eat, drink, defecate, avoid pain, or regulate body temperature;
- safety needs for the body and basic resources; for freedom from fear, danger, chaos; for health, housing, and order;
- social needs for love/belonging, for sociability, friendship, love, sexual intimacy, family life, and social security; and
- needs for esteem, recognition, respect, status, power, money, a career, and a feeling of self-worth.

According to Maslow, humans generally try to satisfy their physiological needs first, then strive for safety, relationships, and esteem. When these fundamental needs have been satisfied to a sufficient degree, intellectual needs develop that can never be fully satisfied:

- cognitive needs for discoveries, knowledge, an understanding of the world and oneself;
- aesthetic needs for appreciation of and a search for beauty;
- self-actualisation needs, to develop one's personal abilities; and
- transcendence needs, for intense spiritual experience.

Each of these general needs can give rise to specific wishes and goals (according to the previously developed pattern), thus leading to action. When this happens, conflicts between the individual levels can arise, and 'higher' needs can win out over 'more basic' needs, such as when a martyr dies for their beliefs; an artist rejects material security for art's sake; a workaholic sacrifices family for the sake of a career; or an anorexic starves themselves to death.

Maslow's model is more comprehensive than most other psychological conceptions of needs, and it is closer to the folk theories viewers use when watching feature films. Above all, however, it is well suited as a heuristic for narrative analysis. When regarded as a flexible heuristic rather than a rigid schema, it can be useful for analysing characters' motives. With its aid, the motives of both individual characters and key constellations of motives throughout entire films or genres can be assigned to certain groups of needs, and compared and related to the social reality: which needs are particularly common among film characters and why? To what extent do they deviate from real-life need structures? What could be the causes and effects of excessive or insufficient representation of certain needs?

⁶ See Maslow 1970; Zimbardo and Gerrig 1999: 324–25; Asendorpf 2005: 211ff.

A typology of needs as narrative themes could be developed in this way, though only suggestions are possible here. *Physiological needs* are the focus in many action films where the protagonist is fighting for their life. In horror and splatter movies, the destruction of the body is a key strategy in producing fear, disgust, or fascination. In other films, physiological needs rather play an accentuating role, entering the foreground only when characters are at their lowest. Late in *Apocalypse Now*, Captain Willard is nearly dying of thirst and physical collapse while Colonel Kurtz's prisoner. *Buffalo 66* begins with the antihero, who has just been released from prison and desperately needs to urinate, but is hindered at every turn until he takes a hostage. More rarely, long-term physiological and material needs occupy the foreground of films, while neorealist works such as *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves*, scatological comedies such as *The Road to Wellville*, and anti-war films such as *Johnny Got His Gun* are exceptions. In television, the melodramatic subgenre of the 'disease of the week' is, however, a standard (Bleicher 1999a: 5). Characters' *safety needs* are often threatened by catastrophic turns in thrillers, Westerns, and gangster films that entail increasingly dangerous situations (*Cape Fear*). *Needs for social relationships*, love in particular, play an essential role in most mainstream films. Melodramas and romantic comedies revolve around the need for love, while other motives either enter into a conflict with it (e.g., one's career in screwball comedies) or are excluded so that viewers focus all their attention on the love story. Underdog or coming-of-age stories tell about the struggle for external *esteem* and a stable feeling of self-worth (*Welcome to the Dollhouse*). Gangster films, musicals, sport films, and biopics tell their own stories about social ascent and the path to power, victory, or a successful career. *Self-actualisation* seems to be inextricably linked to social relationships and self-esteem here. On the other hand, protagonists are driven by other *growth needs* less often. Heroes in religious films (*The Passion of the Christ*) may be the characters that most often strive for *transcendence*, while antiheroes in independent cinema (*Le feu follet/The Fire Within*, *Pierrot le fou/Pierrot the Fool*), biographies of artists (*Vincent & Theo*), and films about geniuses (*Good Will Hunting*) seek mostly knowledge, beauty, or intensity in their lives. In all, the focus of film characters' motivations seems to occupy three levels, which Patrick Colm Hogan has identified as a foundation common to stories that are universal across cultures and time: the search for material abundance, love, and social power (2003b).

Maslow's model seems also useful as a heuristic tool for media practice. It can help to construct effective motivational conflicts: characters risk their social reputation for an *amour fou* or while searching for transcendence; they risk their safety for a friendship; they break out of bonds in the interest of actualising themselves. In addition, the model shows how the heights from which characters fall, and the risks, threats, and conflicts they face can purposefully be intensified to create suspense or sympathy. For example, a character whose essential needs have been satisfied has a great deal to lose, and someone who lacks a great many things has much to gain. Many characters fall down the pyramid of needs rapidly. The victims in slasher and splatter films want fun

and sex at first, then to be safe from the killer, then mere survival is the objective, and lastly, the goal is often simply to avoid pain.

However, Maslow's model should be used with caution and be extended to include additional motives in the analysis. By definition, needs represent the source of primarily self-referential motives. And so, Maslow's typology overlooks important *social* motivations that affect others' well-being. For example, the fears and wishes of parents who take care of their children are grasped indirectly at most. The typology would have to be expanded in this direction so that, in addition to the egotistical motivation, the altruistic aspect is considered. Roland Zag's approach to storytelling can be of use here (2005; see Chapter 6, Section 2). According to Zag, viewers' emotional sympathy depends on how much characters *give* others in terms of material or immaterial assets such as love, help, trust, etc. (*altruism*), in relation to how much they *take* from them (*egotism*). When this approach is applied to social exchange, Zag's model makes it possible, above all, to deepen three of Maslow's levels of needs: the needs for social relationships, self-esteem, and self-actualisation. Characters' relationships and the give and take between them can be positioned on eight 'levels of loyalty': couples, families, friendships, unequal partnerships like teacher and student, teams and other medium-sized groups, countries, spheres of abstract ideals (art), and humankind as a whole. Finally, characters can remain true to themselves (or not). Conflicts can arise for characters both within and between these relationship levels, which intensifies the viewers' interest and emotions.

The give and take between characters is not a simple zero-sum game, as an agent's needs and interests are linked with those of others in a complex way. Social motives aim at an individual's own or someone else's fate in a variety of ways. According to the extent to which humans take others' needs into account in their own actions, social psychologists distinguish between different *kinds of social orientation*, including altruism, individualism, cooperation, competition, aggression, sadism/sado-masochism, masochism, and martyrdom (Bierhoff 2000: 386–87). Some heroes act out of pure altruism, like Superman, and think only of the needs of others. On the other hand, individualists pursue chiefly their own interests and stay out of others' affairs. Characters can cooperate with others to pursue common interests and satisfy common needs; this applies to both harmonious romances and survivors in disaster films. In most stories, however, the characters' interests conflict at some point. Competing characters attempt to maximise their own benefit and minimise that of their antagonist (gangsters versus police officers, romantic rivals). Others are verbally or physically so aggressive that they even lose sight of their own good, as their primary aim is to hurt the opponent (*Dirty Harry*). Sadism and sado-masochism can sometimes combine this with pleasurable sensations (in part reciprocal); masochists enjoy sacrificing their own needs. When a martyr, the victim serves chiefly others or some common issue (Joan of Arc, Beth in *Breaking the Waves*). Some of these motives are socially desirable or accepted (martyrdom, altruism, cooperation, individualism, competition),

while others are considered perverse or socially incompatible (aggression, sadism, masochism). This is an important factor in the evaluation of characters.

Most of the human needs mentioned in Maslow's taxonomy can only be satisfied in a social context, and this can take place in a cooperative, individualistic, or competitive manner. However, characters can also be sadists or masochists, aggressors, altruists, or martyrs who are concerned less with their own needs than injuries to or benefits for others. Thus, the motivation of characters' behaviour is more comprehensive than Maslow's model. Moreover, many actions do not result directly from a need, but involve intermediate steps that shape more specific fears, wishes and desires that then lead to decisions and goals (see above, Diagram 19).

Such relatively concrete wishes and desires can be more or less *fulfillable*, *confrontational*, and *conscious* (Stückrath 1990: 100–01). Some of them can be achieved with little difficulty: the millionaire Edward in *Pretty Woman* can immediately satisfy many wishes with money. Others lead to relatively minor conflicts, which can be resolved easily, such as squabbles between odd couples who are forced to stick together to achieve a greater objective (*Some Like It Hot*, *48 Hrs.*). The central wishes of mainstream protagonists, on the other hand, generally face major internal or external obstacles. How fulfillable wishes are also depends on how conscious they are. When characters are subconsciously driven by suppressed fears or wishes, they often get on the wrong track. For example, the sexual fantasies of the protagonist in *Repulsion* are combined with terror and disgust, which intensify her rejection of obtrusive men until she commits violent acts with fatal outcomes, driving her insane.

Characters' fears, desires, and wishes are not always directly relevant to the main plot but may be still very important for analysis. Some characters do not act according to their wishes because they seem impossible to achieve or they remain unconscious, blocked, or suppressed. Unconscious wishes for societal change can, for example, be presumed in the minds of the farmers in Bertolucci's *Novecento/1900*. The difference between wish and reality as depicted in a film can be so significant that a character is not even able to formulate the wish, for example because of internalised social norms, as in *Jeanne Dielman*. In such cases, films can create the impression that some of the characters' needs are unsatisfied and a wish for their satisfaction would develop in different circumstances (e.g., in a more just, equal, or liberal society). Some kinds of wishes seem to be wholly unimaginable in the represented world, or the filmmakers consider them impossible to achieve. Female characters in Westerns rarely try to become sheriff. A media history of unimaginable wishes and desires might be quite interesting.

While the importance of implicit or impossible desires should not be underestimated, the central, long-term motives that keep the plot moving are paramount to storytelling. Mainstream protagonists usually pursue conscious, clearly defined goals that are difficult to achieve and increase the tension for the end. Often, they and their

antagonists also follow elaborate plans that arouse curiosity, such as the complicated intrigues in courtly dramas, or Rick's plan to rescue Ilsa and Victor.

The nature of protagonists' and antagonists' goals influences essential plot structures and corresponding audience reactions such as sympathy, antipathy or empathy, suspense, surprise or curiosity, joy or sadness about the film's ending. Scholars and writers—such as Ronald B. Tobias (1993)—have developed various plot typologies based on the protagonists' central goals:⁷ in a quest plot, characters search for something; in a revenge plot, they seek retribution; in a rivalry plot, they struggle to defeat a competitor, and so on. In all these cases, the characters' goals shape the plot, which in turn requires certain basic traits of the characters. The desire for revenge usually requires strength and self-righteousness, the desire for change requires dissatisfaction with oneself, the desire to solve a mystery requires curiosity and perseverance. Comedies can play with this and put, for example, a weak character in a revenge story or a forgetful character in a mystery story.

Audience reactions to a plot are also influenced by the character's previous relationship to the desired object or state, which can be linked to strong values and feelings of justice or empathy (Stückrath 1990: 286f.; 1992). Some protagonists, often underdogs and outsiders, strive for something they never had, such as a modest income or true love in melodramas. Other characters defend something important that is about to be taken away from them—power, prestige, their family or their life. Others again want something back that they have already lost, as in *Ladri di biciclette* / *Bicycle Thieves*. Or they try to cope with a loss—of sense of life in *Le feu follet* / *The Fire Within*, or of physical health in *Johnny Got His Gun*. In *Casablanca*, Rick is torn between winning his lost love back and dealing with the loss.

The characters' goals often lead the audience to expect a certain ending early on, thereby creating an underlying mood of hope or fear. This also depends on whether the characters pursue all-or-nothing goals or partially attainable goals (see Mees 1991: 47). All-or-nothing goals with a high risk can be found in many mainstream films. The hero of *Independence Day* either manages to fight off the aliens' attack or the world will be destroyed. Romeo and Juliet either become a couple or do not. Other goals may, on the other hand, be reached only partially. Batman may be able to defeat his opponent, but his fight against the underworld never ends, because Gotham is always spawning new criminals. Viewers of *Casablanca* can assume early on that Rick's wishes to get Ilsa back, help her husband, and maintain his own integrity will come into conflict, and satisfying them all will not be possible. These examples suggest that protagonists' goals are linked with characteristic affective patterns typical for certain genres.

7 This aligns Tobias with the tradition of Rudyard Kipling, Etienne Souriau, and Carlo Gozzi, though no claim is made, as with some of his predecessors, that his plot typology is complete and covers all conceivable kinds of stories.

The above distinctions of the motivational structure of characters and their relation to the plot can be helpful in analysis and interpretation. Let's take a brief look at the example of *Casablanca* again. Here, the need for passionate love (one of the strongest social bonds) is a central motive of the main characters. In crucial sequences of the film, Rick and Ilsa are prepared to risk their physical needs, safety, and esteem to obtain it. The film's nostalgic aspect is produced not least by the fact that they want to regain their lost love, a goal that could potentially spark a conflict and due to circumstances is attainable only in part ('We'll always have Paris'). Neither Ilsa nor the viewers should want her to leave her heroic husband (nor would that conform to the Production Code, a crucial influence on textual motivation). Therefore, Rick's and Ilsa's actions can also be perceived as attempts to cope with a hard, unavoidable, and irrevocable loss.

The main characters' more specific motivations could be described in that Rick's behaviour develops from being partially impulsive and determined by unconscious aggressions to well-considered, rational action, while Ilsa undergoes the opposite development, from rational to impulsive and emotional behaviour.⁸ At the beginning of the film, while Rick demonstrates control in his business life, there are emotional outbursts, such as when he gets drunk in despair and insults Ilsa. In contrast, at the film's end, he successfully puts his risky rescue plan into action and explains (or mansplains) to Ilsa why their separation is unavoidable, using rational arguments. Ilsa, on the other hand, at first reacts to Rick in a controlled and well-considered manner by trying to reconcile with him and emphasising her role as Laszlo's wife. Later, however, she is overwhelmed by passion during her second attempt to obtain the letters of transit. As a result of these motivational shifts, the hierarchies of power within their relationship reverse. At first, Ilsa has more power, then Rick. A parallel development takes place in the way in which Rick and Ilsa take others' interests into consideration: Rick turns from an egotist with aggressive and sadistic tendencies—manifested when he humiliates Yvonne and insults Ilsa—into an altruist who sacrifices his great love for the common good. Ilsa, on the other hand, is faithful to her husband at first and feels responsible for him, then leaves the decision about their fate to his rival, Rick. In terms of ruling norms and moral standards, his conduct develops from socially undesirable to desirable, while the reverse happens with Ilsa. In regard to both power and social assessment, the man's position is strengthened, while the woman's is weakened, and the traditional hierarchy of patriarchal gender roles is restored.

The analysis of Rick's and Ilsa's motivations will be deepened later. It may, however, already indicate how the specific motivational constellations of individual characters, films, or groups of films can be described and compared. The motives correlate with norms and values that the characters embody, thereby shaping films and their themes.

8 From a psychoanalytical perspective, one could question whether sadistic impulses are behind Rick's rationality, or Ilsa's emotionality possibly conceals a calculating attitude, but there is little evidence to support that.

9.2 Motivation and Conflict

A Simplified Model of Motivational Conflicts: Outer Wants, Inner Needs, and Crucial Flaws

As we have seen, characters are often perceived as being driven by several different, and often conflicting motives, which leaves various interpretations open to viewers. Screenwriting manuals propose a practical model that condenses and simplifies common folk psychological assumptions about the complex, contradictory nature of human motivation. It distinguishes between three motivational forces that influence each other: characters' external want (also called goal, wish, or purpose), their internal need, and their central flaw.⁹ The potential variety of motivational forms described above is reduced to these three central aspects, which are seen as dominating the characterisation and the development of the action. This simplifying model has proven useful for practical analysis of character motivation in mainstream narratives, because the conventions and constraints of storytelling usually lead the audience to imagine such relatively simple motivational systems in the characters, which have clearer, often dramatically enhanced contours compared to the motives of real people.

As mentioned before, the dramatic structure of most Western mainstream films is characterised by a general problem-solving arc that spans the entire film (Eder 1999; Thompson 1999; Wuss 2009). While the main characters' objectives may be in fact structured in more complex ways through subplots, conflicting goals and other narrative strategies, their central goal and conflict is considered crucial. Protagonists' *outer wants or goals* concern the solution of a concrete problem, for example, being able to scientifically predict the behaviour of tornados in *Twister*, finding the mysterious Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*, being together with the beloved in *Titanic*, regaining the ability to express oneself through music in *The Piano*. Such main dramatic arcs are organised into sequences and smaller units in which changing subgoals determine the characters' actions. According to storytelling conventions, it should be possible to relate these subgoals to the single higher goal. This higher goal should be clearly recognisable for viewers, generate expectations and suspense relating to the outcome, and focus their attention on the central story arc. In order to generate interest in a plausible way, the characters should have goals that are as powerful as possible so as to justify expectations that they will undertake dramatic action, accept risks, and make momentous decisions (Newman 2001: #2). Actions in individual scenes and sequences are also goal-oriented in this way: 'In each sequence, the central character will have a specific goal, which

⁹ See, for instance, Newman 2001; Phillips and Huntley 1999. Cattrysse 2010 offers a clear conceptual reflection and critique of the want/need/flaw model that shares many points with my following argument and is in some respects more detailed.

they believe is a definitive step towards achieving their overall screenplay goal' (Frensham 1996: 135).

The mainstream focus on a goal-oriented plot development that is as dramatic, emotional and plausible as possible has far-reaching consequences for the trait structure of suitable and typical protagonists (see Newman 2001: #1–4; Seger 1990: 76–77; and Chapter 8 in this book). They must be emotional and focused enough to set a clear goal; intelligent enough to solve difficult problems; courageous enough to take risks; strong and skilled enough not to fail definitively at the first attempt; have enough concentration and willpower to keep their eyes on the goal and not give up despite all obstacles. Therefore, narrative conventions of plot and motivation tend to turn mainstream protagonists into positive identification figures who seem superior in certain respects to most real people. This is not a new insight, but perhaps more surprising is that antagonists must also have some similar strengths in order to develop the desired intensity of conflict. Even if their goal is to be evaluated negatively in moral terms, most antagonists are at least assured respect as a result. This normative conception can already be found in Jean Paul's poetics of the early nineteenth century:

Consequently, a purely imperfect character would be cowardly, malicious, disreputable weakness. But the muse rejects this worm. [...] Why does poetry hate weakness to such a degree? Because it represents the dissipating, lukewarm, repulsive cloud of all will and life itself, meaning that in the machinery of the fable in which the soul is expected to function, it becomes a weak corpse and a machine and consequently negates the story; because without will there is as little a story as exists in a world history of cattle. (Jean Paul 1974: § 58)

However, the main characters' motivations do not remain limited to an outer want pursued with the power of their will. At the same time, main characters should have—as screenwriting manuals add—an overarching *inner need* that must be satisfied. In *Twister*, the hero leaves his office job and a pseudo-relationship and returns to his old passion as a researcher and his true love. In *Apocalypse Now*, Captain Willard overcomes his psychological damage and recognises the war's absurdity. In addition to true love, Rose finds freedom and autonomy in *Titanic*. Ada in *The Piano* also achieves recognition, love, autonomy, and freedom from patriarchal domination. While characters consciously pursue the outer goal, their inner need often remains hidden to them, although it influences and drives them and marks their lives. An important lack is involved, which reduces the quality of their lives significantly and which may range from physiological needs such as food to a need for self-actualisation or transcendence. Screenwriting guides suggest explaining this need above all through the character's backstory, mostly through traumatic experiences, striking physical or mental injuries (such as the death of the female lead's father in *Twister*), less often through permanent living

conditions such as poverty or being bullied (as in *Moonlight*). Both kinds of characters' traumata, 'backstory wounds' or 'ghosts' are conventionally depicted in flashbacks.

Characters' needs and their causes can be shown or spelled out explicitly (such as Elliott's need for friendship and intimacy in *E.T.*, the traumatic beginning of *Vertigo* that explains the protagonist's fear of heights and life), or they can be suggested implicitly (for instance, through Ada's inability to speak in *The Piano*). In most cases, the viewers recognise the characters' needs and know what would be good for them, although the characters themselves neither clearly recognise the needs nor how to satisfy them. In romantic comedies such as *When Harry Met Sally* or in melodramas such as *Gone with the Wind*, it is often obvious from the very beginning that the male and female leads are meant for one another, that they are the matching couple, but they fail to recognise this themselves and pursue the wrong partner. In other cases, the protagonists—such as Roger Thornhill in *North by Northwest* or Therese in *Carol*—believe that everything is fine, while the viewers already suspect that they are not truly satisfied with life and that something new awaits them. All this shows that the characters' need is not determinable from their own perspective, as is often assumed, but from the audience's perspective: it is what the audience thinks the characters would need in order to live a good and happy life (cf. also Cattrysse 2010).

The audience is supposed to see the satisfaction of the character's need as something intrinsically positive. But this is by no means true of all the protagonist's desires. Often traumatic experiences are also the source of a *key flaw* that is closely connected to the inner need, but at the same time stands in the way of its satisfaction and leads to wrong goals and actions (Newman 2001: #15–18). The key flaw in the protagonist's character may be an inadequate reaction to past experiences, a misguided strategy for coping with them, an incorrect attitude, a logical error, a moral weakness, unnecessary fear, excessive sensitivity—in short, anything that may be seen as a defect of the personality or a disturbance of appropriate, goal-directed behaviour. The flaw results in the character pursuing erroneous goals and making counterproductive attempts to satisfy their need. This can take on the form of acting out. A sense of absence, frustration, emptiness, or pain drives the character to misbehaviour that fails to produce positive results, and to dispositions of irritability, self-pity, depression, or violence. Some characters fail as a result (*Raging Bull*; *Bad Lieutenant*), or the character develops a misguided strategy for dealing with or eliminating the lack the need entails (*Taxi Driver*; *Fish Tank*). The wish for recognition leads the character to boast and be conceited, to be overly self-critical and socially anxious, or to be obsessed with power.

According to a common narrative pattern, the character's backstory produces not only the inner need but also the related key flaw: traumatic backstory →

inner need + key flaw. The conflict between the wishes or fears resulting from the inner need, and others produced by the key flaw, can lead to unproductive, antisocial behaviour, such as when wishes for intimacy are accompanied by fears of rejection and the character breaks off relationships. In many cases, characters are unaware of their mistakes or unable to avoid them. In tragedies, the characters' key flaw—e.g., Macbeth's hunger for power—inexorably leads to their downfall, while in other stories it can be eliminated if the characters change and are able to satisfy their inner needs. Satisfaction of the inner need and victory over the key flaw are often the decisive aspects of the character's development and change.

The inner needs of mainstream protagonists are also closely related to their outer goals, in at least three different ways:

1. (Overcoming the key flaw →) Achieving the external goal → satisfying the inner need. The first possibility is that the character's inner need is satisfied by achieving the external goal. In this case, need and goal are compatible or interdependent. For example, this is the case with matching couples in romantic comedies whose need for love is satisfied only when they get together in the happy ending, or for the heroes of sports films who satisfy their need for recognition by beating a powerful opponent after training hard. Achieving the goal is necessary in this case for satisfying the need; the two coincide.
2. (Overcoming the key flaw →) Satisfying the inner need → achieving the external goal. Satisfaction of the need can also, vice versa, be indispensable for the character to achieve the goal. The meteorologist in *Twister* achieves his goal of predicting the development of tornados by quitting his desk job and going back to the woman who is right for him and shares his passion for scientific research.

In such cases, inner and outer motivations aid one another. The goal pulls while the need pushes (Newman 2001). In the third case, on the other hand, they pull in different directions:

3. Satisfying the inner need ←||→ achieving the outer goal. With a large number of characters, the inner need and outer goal come into conflict. The character's need might be to become a respected and popular person with a clear conscience. However, the need for love and recognition could drive them to betray someone or even commit a murder, which blocks satisfaction of the need (*Wall Street*; *Macbeth*; *Swimming with Sharks*; *Rain Man*).

With conflicts such as this, the character must often at some point decide between the inner need and the outer goal, which can mean either a happy or unhappy ending for the story.¹⁰ Sometimes, it also turns out that the path was actually the goal. While the character has failed to achieve the outer goal, they have grown while pursuing it, have learned from their mistakes, and have found satisfaction as a result. This kind of constellation sometimes lead to a bittersweet ending.

In arthouse films or films from non-Western cultures, the external goals can become less important than the inner needs or flaws of the characters. For example, the main characters in films by Céline Sciamma, Michelangelo Antonioni, or Ryusuke Hamaguchi usually do not pursue clear goals, but struggle in various forms with a lack of something and with unsatisfied needs. This can also be observed in New Hollywood films, for example when the Vietnam War veteran in *Taxi Driver* drifts aimlessly, disturbed, and latently aggressively through the big city.

From the perspective of mainstream filmmaking, in contrast, the strategy of providing characters with an inner need rather serves to reinforce their outer motivation and the conflict potential; make their attitudes, moods, and key flaws plausible; make them seem more complex and multi-layered; or generate sympathy for and empathy with them (Newman 2001). In the same way as the character's external goal and conflicts generate the main action-based plot, the inner need can give rise to a parallel inner story that can be even more important for the development of values, themes, and emotions. Screenwriting guides highlight the importance of subplots (Eder 1999: 48–51), and David Bordwell pointed out that most Hollywood films between 1917 and 1960 (and probably beyond) contain two parallel plot lines, one of them being a heterosexual love story (Bordwell 1985a: 157). The main character's inner need is often developed or deepened in these kinds of subplots.

In summary, the connection between backstory, external want, inner need, and key flaw can be illustrated as follows (see Diagram 20; the solid lines with a single arrow represent causal effects and the dotted lines with arrows on both ends indicate a conflict). Characters' needs and wants are often explained through their backstory. They can reinforce each other, or clash. In any case, they conflict with the key flaws that characters must overcome or that cause their failure. In most mainstream films, at least the character's inner need is satisfied, though when and how this happens can vary greatly. We will soon take a look at how the relationship between want, need and flaw, i.e., between the protagonist's external goals, internal needs and character flaws, typically develops in the course of mainstream plots. But first, we turn to the basic structure of the plot conflicts in which want, need and flaw are involved.

10 Some complicated examples of this can be found. In *Leaving Las Vegas*, the goal of the protagonist (Nicolas Cage), drinking himself to death, conflicts with his need to love and be loved. On the other hand, it is what makes possible temporary satisfaction of the need for love through the unconditional love of the prostitute (Elizabeth Shue). The normative components that contain the conception of the inner need become especially obvious here: one is hesitant to term the desire to die as the inner need, instead regarding it as the key flaw.

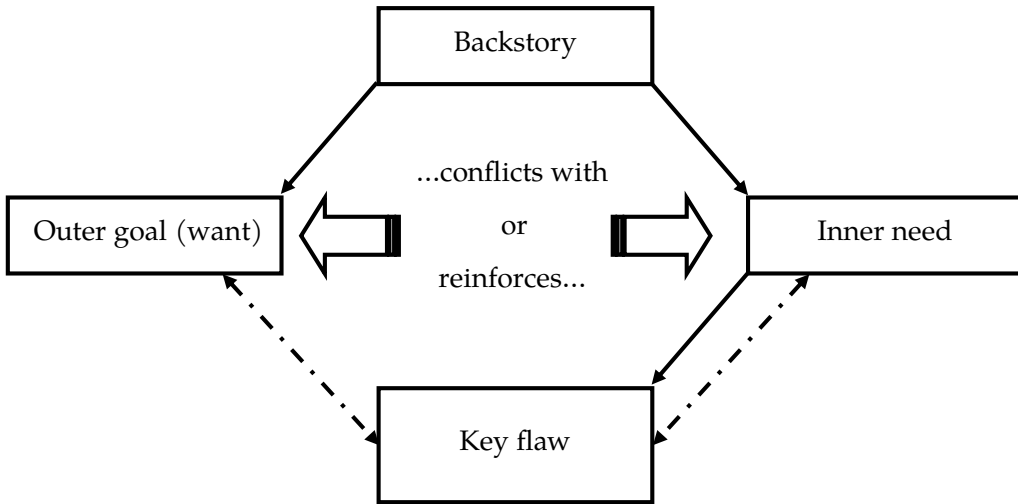


Diagram 20 Relations between backstory, outer goal, inner need, and key flaw

Motivation and the Structure of Conflict

The way in which a character's motivation leads to their inner and outer conflicts can be analysed more generally with the help of Diagram 21, which can be read from top to bottom and from bottom to top towards the conflict at its centre.¹¹ The characters pursue an external goal with their actions, which is determined by their inner need or their central flaw, whether consciously or unconsciously (upper half of the diagram). In doing so, they take risks, and the extent of these risks or the characters' falling height depends on their situation at the beginning of the action. In *Carol*, a wealthy housewife risks her marriage, her social position and the custody of her child to be with the love of her life. Macbeth, initially a powerful and respected prince, ends up hated and beheaded for murdering the king.

¹¹ Comparable diagrams can be found in several screenwriting manuals such as Frensham 1996: 91, and are used in screenwriting courses such as those by Jurgen Wolff.

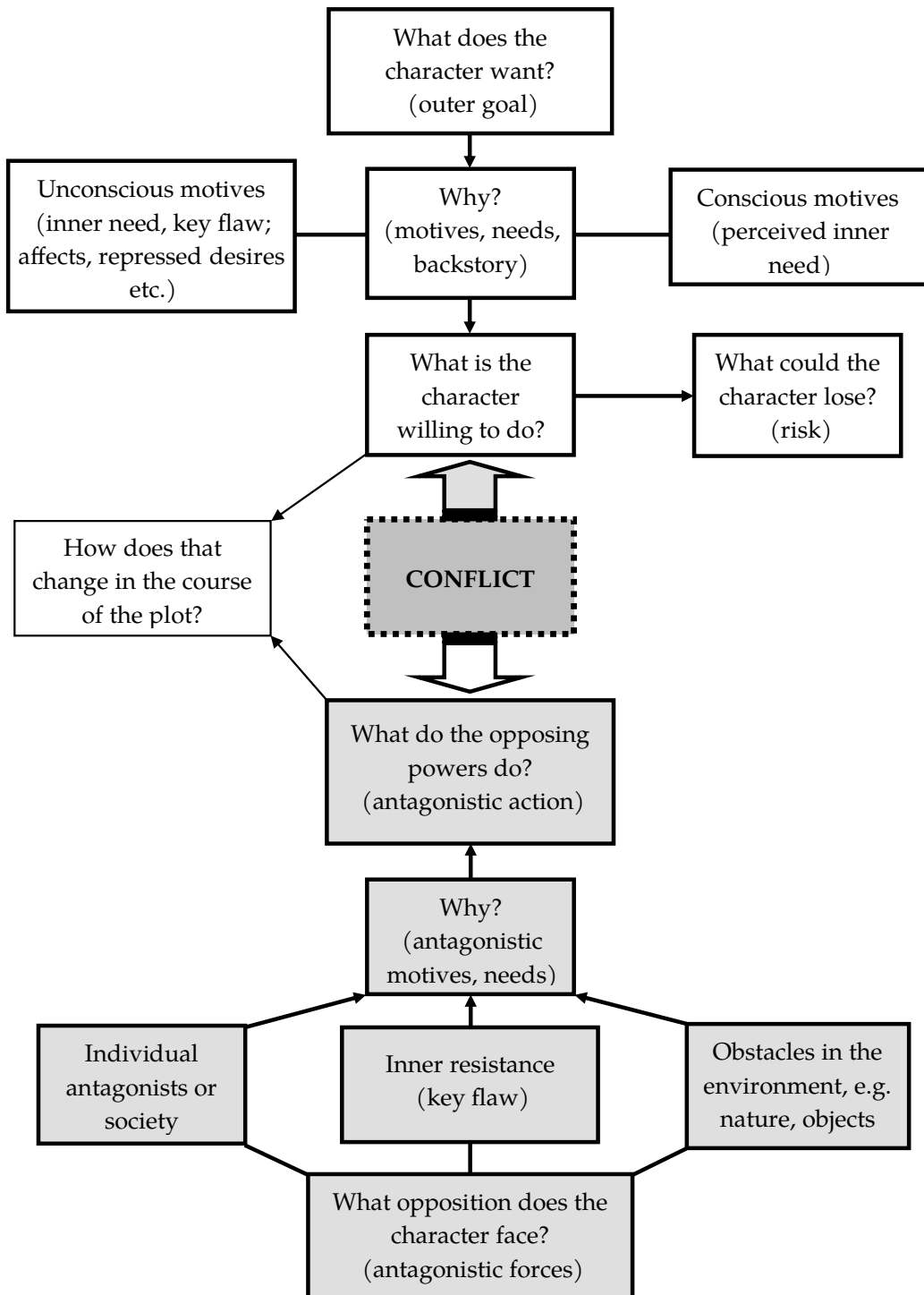


Diagram 21 From needs and goals to conflicts (based on Frensham 1996: 91, referring to Jurgen Wolff)

Conflicts arise when antagonistic forces oppose a character's actions (lower half of the diagram). Chapter 10 describes in more detail the patterns of antagonism that are possible in different character constellations. The antagonistic forces may be the character's own conflicting wants or their central flaws, such as anxiousness or arrogance. In mainstream plots, however, external obstacles are even more important. These can be forces of nature (in disaster films) or the unruliness of inanimate objects (in slapstick comedies). In most cases, however, the protagonists face personal, individual antagonists who themselves pursue goals, struggle to satisfy needs and are influenced by flaws. This forms the central conflict in many genres, such as romantic comedy, drama, thriller, horror, action/adventure, Western, or gangster film. In some cases, a set of opposing characters may also convey the antagonism of larger groups or social norms, i.e., a conflict with society. Since the exacerbation of conflict is an essential principle of mainstream narratives, the protagonists often have to overcome all these types of obstacles, internal, natural, individual, or social. Often the obstacles and the resulting partial goals of the characters change in the course of the story. Moreover, the characters themselves also change in the process and go through a character arc. The decisive criterion for whether a conflict solution is perceived as positive or negative is whether the character's need is fulfilled, thus creating the conditions for their good, satisfied life and confirming the audience's values. In comparison, fulfilling the character's want is only second and overcoming their flaw is third.

Conflict Development, Plot Structures, and Character Arcs

The simple want/need/ flaw model of motivation already opens up a surprisingly complex range of possibilities for resolving a protagonist's central conflict. Most narrative theorists and storytelling manuals focus only on the four possible combinations of Want and Need (see, for instance, Stückrath 1992: 47–48). They can be ordered from positive to negative in the following way:

1. Pure happy ending (want+ / need+): in most mainstream narratives, such as *Finding Nemo*, the protagonists achieve their external goal, and their inner needs are also satisfied.
2. Bittersweet ending (want- / need+): other protagonists, such as Rick Blaine or Bud Fox in *Wall Street*, have to give up their original goal, but their inner need can be fulfilled.
3. Tragic irony (want+ / need-): in such cases, the characters achieve their outer goal, but their inner need must remain unfulfilled, often for that very reason (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*).
4. Tragedy (want- / need-): in classical tragedies or modern ones such as *Leviathan*, protagonists are denied both their want and their need—a devastating ending.

However, even if we take the simple want/need/flip model of motivation as a basis, the actual range of possible conflict solutions and endings is far broader than this widely used schema suggests. Firstly, in each of the four endings above, the characters can either have overcome their central flaw or they have to live on with it. Moreover, the characters' wants and needs may be satisfied either fully or only partially. All that makes a difference for the character's symbolic function, the film's thematic message, and the viewers' affective responses.

In linear mainstream narratives, the development of the conflict to its resolution predominantly follows the conventional pattern of three or four acts, structured by several plot points (Eder 1999; Thompson 1999). This pattern is oriented towards the protagonists' want or outer goal: they live in their familiar world, are confronted with a problem, make unsuitable attempts to solve it, find new and better ways of solving it (often by acquiring new abilities), finally solve it in a special effort (or fail at it) and go on living without the problem. The want/need/flip model complicates this pattern, because it raises the question of the temporal order and causal relationship between want, need and flip, i.e., which of them must be changed first so that the other can change.¹² In *Rocky*, for example, the underdog boxer can fulfil his need for self-esteem and recognition by achieving his want of standing up to his famous opponent in the ring (want+ → need+). In *The Silence of the Lambs*, on the other hand, FBI agent Clarice Starling can take down the serial killer only because her mentor Hannibal Lecter has previously guided her to overcome her trauma and develop more self-confidence (need+ → want+).

The achievement of the external goal, and even more the satisfaction of the internal need, is typically linked in the model to the characters changing: they have to learn and grow to overcome their central flaw, which is usually of a moral nature (Kelly 2016). This convention of growth in the course of a character arc has become so entrenched that Charlie Kaufman (both as writer and protagonist) desperately resists it in a conversation with a producer at the beginning of *Adaptation*: 'I don't want to cram in sex or guns or car chases or characters learning profound life lessons or growing or coming to like each other or overcome obstacles to succeed in the end. The book [he is hired to adapt] isn't like that, and life isn't like that, it just isn't!' Nevertheless, Charlie will implement exactly these conventions later in the film, guided by a fictional version of a famous script consultant. So much for the power of this convention.

The conventional character arc of mainstream narratives can take two basic forms. Both presuppose a protagonist who possesses some virtuous personality traits but at the same time distinctive vices or flaws, and therefore shows both adequate, prosocial and inadequate, antisocial behaviour. The common form of development of such

12 Newman (2001) names the following as typical phases of need fulfilment in the mainstream plot: the point of attack (then still more must be done to satisfy the need completely), the turning point at the end of the second act (when the key flaw is often overcome before the need is satisfied) and (most frequently) the film's climax near the end of the third act just before the resolution.

protagonists is positive and depicts ‘growth’ through a learning process in which they are able to overcome their flaws—be it hubris, fearfulness, egocentricity, anger, ignorance or something else—and thereby fulfil their need. The rarer form of the character arc is negative, here the protagonist’s flaw worsens to such an extent that it leads to a downfall (as in *Macbeth*, *Citizen Kane*, and *The Godfather*, but also in arthouse films such as *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, see Chapter 4). Between these two poles of transformation for the better or worse lie more ambivalent shifts in personality traits or social roles, especially in arthouse cinema (see Hay 2022: Chapter 1). However, these are rarely truly neutral, but tend towards one pole or the other and are excluded here for the sake of simplicity. The following table summarises the typical developmental steps of both character arcs and relates them to the problem-solving arc (Table 7).

Problem-solving arc (want)	Positive character arc	Negative character arc
Character lives in familiar world	Character with positive potential but significant flaw and lack of self-knowledge	Character with positive potential but significant flaw and lack of self-knowledge
Point of attack: character is confronted with a problem or conflict	Forced to begin a process of change, usually without realising it	Neglecting positive potential, enjoying the symptom
Inadequate attempts to solve the problem or overcome the conflict	Struggling with partial, inadequate attempts to change and learn which make everything even more difficult	Character is successful precisely because of their flaw, but goes into wrong direction
Acquiring helpful tools, abilities, or allies for dealing with the problem	Gradually learning and growing, acquiring new knowledge, abilities, or powers	Crucial, (morally) wrong decisions, often harming significant others
Climax: solving the problem, overcoming the conflict (or ultimately failing to do so)	Acquiring fundamental ability or insight, enabling the character to achieve their goal, to fulfil their need, often also to change the storyworld	Painful realisation of own flaw and its negative consequences
Character in changed world	Changed, often flourishing character	Destroyed character

Table 7 Typical phases of positive and negative character arcs in the course of a narrative (mixed forms with positive developments in one respect and negative in another are also possible)

Casablanca is a clear example of the positive character arc: in the beginning, Rick shows positive as well as negative personality traits and later, he is able to fulfil his fundamental need by overcoming his character flaws.¹³ At the same time, the classic film is atypical for a Hollywood movie in terms of its problem-solving arc. While mainstream films normally focus on the protagonist’s pursuit of a concrete goal, this is not the case in

¹³ Rory Kelly (2016) has described this arc in a different, but compatible and very clear and illustrative way.

Casablanca. Victor Laszlo and Ilsa have a specific mutual goal: they desperately need the letters of transit in order to escape the Nazis. Rick's actions, on the other hand, consist almost exclusively in his refusal to give them the letters. His reasons are never made entirely clear. Does he want to keep Ilsa in Casablanca? Win her back? Induce her to leave her husband? Get revenge? His shifting, ambivalent actions sometimes suggest one answer, then another. He seems not to be sure what he wants himself. In the beginning, when Ilsa tries to explain her past and present situation, Rick insults her. Then he half-heartedly attempts to make peace by talking to her at the bazaar. After finding out that Ilsa is married to Laszlo, he avoids her. In spite of his admiration of Laszlo, Rick still refuses to give him the letters of transit, even though this puts them at risk of being arrested and murdered by the Nazis. Only after Ilsa declares her undying love and puts her fate in his hands, Rick swings into action and implements his escape plan. But apparently his previous actions were not intended to elicit Ilsa's declaration of love, as Rick reacts with an expression of surprise and disbelief. Up to this point, Rick seems to lack a clearly defined outer goal, with regard to either the letters-of-transit plot or the romance plot, and the majority of his actions represent omissions to act. His passivity in the main plot line is balanced by subplots and other characters' activities. In short, Rick is a passive protagonist without a strong want or clear outer goal, which is rather uncommon in classical Hollywood films.

On the other hand, his inner need and key flaw are quite distinct, and the film devotes a great deal of time and attention to their representation. As shown in previous chapters, Rick is introduced as someone who, in spite of his abilities, professional success, and high social status, is profoundly bitter and unhappy. It quickly becomes clear that he has given up on himself and that the disappointment caused by his great love, Ilsa, is behind it. While he demonstrates loyalty to his employees and fulfils his social role as a café owner, Rick has lost his idealism and in certain situations displays coldness (Ugarte) or cruelty (Yvonne). He has broken with his previous identity and orientation toward altruistic values. His integrity seems to have been destroyed—his loyalty to himself, his moral sense, his self-esteem and the meaning of his life, his inner coherence, sense of satisfaction and 'wholeness'. The film suggests that Rick's inner need is to overcome this inner wound by reconciling with Ilsa and restoring his integrity. The main obstacle is posed by his key flaw, a combination of egotism, self-pity, and having given up on himself, accompanied by a lack of interest in the fate of others. In the final analysis, *Casablanca* is less about Rick and Ilsa's love than how this flaw is to be overcome. Above all, the film tells us how Rick regains his integrity, sense of life, and self-esteem by accepting responsibility for others and deciding to do without Ilsa. This makes it possible to explain the previously described contrary development of motivations that moves Rick from a position of weakness to one of strength (while the opposite is the case for Ilsa). Moreover, *Casablanca* shows how a changed character may be able the storyworld: Rick will not only fight against the Nazis, but his example motivates Renault to do the same.

Shifting Needs, Incompatible Desires, and Inner Conflicts

The want/need/flip model of motivation, then, seems to be quite suitable for analysing mainstream films and their character arcs. Moreover, it indicates an important tendency in the motivation and development of mainstream and arthouse characters. While mainstream narratives usually focus on the protagonist's want and their struggle to reach their external goal, arthouse or independent films seem to focus more on the protagonists' need or their flaw. This helps to better understand the distinction between 'plot-centred' vs 'character-centred' or 'theme-centred' narratives. And there are further differences that concern characters' architecture of motives. As we have seen, even mainstream conventions suggest that the motivation systems of main characters should include various central motives that exist simultaneously, clash at times, or are in constant conflict. In many films, however, especially in arthouse cinema, this constellation of motives cannot be simply reduced to the triad of external want, internal need, and key flaw. One example is provided by Truffaut's Antoine Doinel trilogy.



Fig. 37 In *Love on the Run*, Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Léaud) is caught between his wife Christine (Claude Jade, on the right) and her friend Liliane (Dani). (Dir. François Truffaut, *Love on the Run*, 1979, Les Films du Carrosse, France. All rights reserved.)

According to Dario Tomasi, Doinel's behaviour is essentially determined by two conflicting needs: the need for security and the need for freedom.¹⁴ To be more precise,

¹⁴ See Tomasi 1988: 98–115. While Tomasi proceeds from an internalisation of Greimas's actantial model—the actantial functions are supposed to help describe the character's motivation—a more fitting description can be made using the concept of constellations of motives.

one could speak of a need for relationship, recognition, and security on the one hand and an antithetical need for self-actualisation and stimulation on the other. Conflict between the two manifests itself differently in Doinel's changeable relationship to time, society, and love (see Diagram 22). In terms of time, the need for security results in desires for a stable way of life, or even for eternity, while the need for freedom leads him to want to live from one moment to the next. In a social sense, the need for security produces wishes for integration into society: Doinel looks for employment, makes an effort, takes on various job-related social roles. The need for freedom, however, gives rise to desires to violate constricting norms and break free, which cause him to run away in *Les 400 coups/The 400 Blows* and later to changing jobs repeatedly and prioritising his private life over his professional life. With regard to romance, Doinel's need for security generates wishes for protection and permanence, which lead him to marry Christine and father a child. The need for freedom, again, drives his fleeting relationships and his affairs with Fabienne and Kyoko.

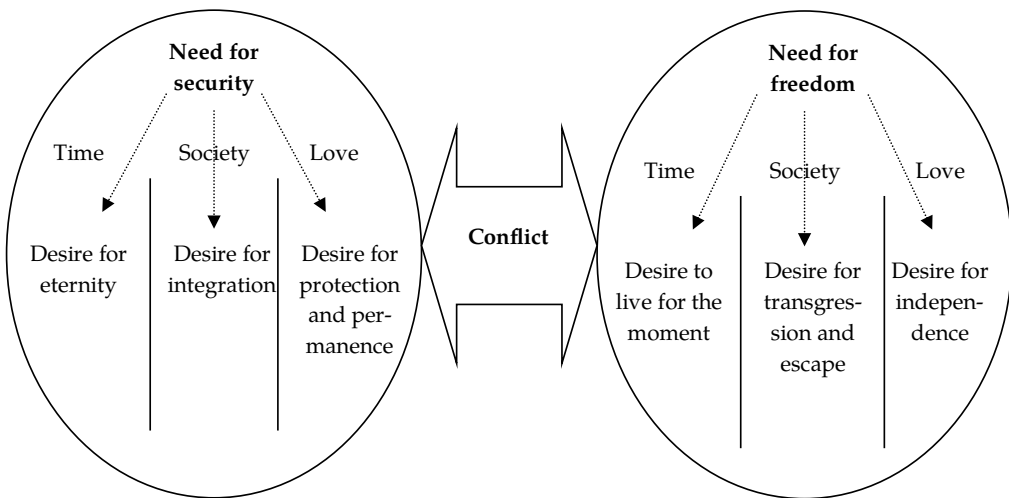


Diagram 22 Motivational conflicts shaping the personality of Truffaut's Antoine Doinel (based on Tomasi 1988: 115)

Doinel's conflicting needs thus lead to unstable, frequently changing outer goals which involve him repeatedly in conflicts with teachers, employers, his wife, and his lovers. In contrast to the want/need/flow model of motivations, they do neither project one true inner need to be satisfied nor suggest an ideal solution for Doinel's inner conflict. Instead, they represent his contradictory needs and wants as being equally relevant, his inner conflict as impossible to resolve, and his outer conflicts as unavoidable. Moreover, they do not suggest a key flaw to be overcome. Their light-hearted, ironic tone even downplays Doinel's obvious narcissism and sexism as endearing human (or 'typically male') weaknesses.

9.3 Motivational Systems, Personality, and Identity

As the previous examples have already indicated, characters' motives not only guide their individual actions in specific situations, but also form an essential part of their personality, defined as the relatively stable system of perceptual, cognitive, emotional, and motivational dispositions that manifests itself in characteristic behavioural tendencies (see Chapter 6). Viewers often explain the behaviour of characters from their personalities and attribute to them relatively constant motivational systems with a certain architecture, dominated by certain particularly important and action-relevant motives. In *Léolo*, for example, the older brother is driven primarily by his deep-seated fear of being beaten up and humiliated. This fear drives him to train for years and to acquire a muscular body as a kind of protective shield (which, unfortunately, will not stop his tormentors later).

As we have seen in Chapter 5 and 6, there are very different ways of modelling the personality and long-term motivation of characters. Authors and media practitioners have wrestled with this challenge, mostly in order to create characters that meet the conventional criteria of mainstream realism and thus are perceived as psychologically realistic, coherent, consistent, dramatic, easy to understand and yet sufficiently complex (see Chapter 8, Section 2). To achieve this, storytelling manuals suggest using certain typologies of personality and motivation. These practice-led typologies do not necessarily match science or reality, but they have very real consequences: by producing conventions for film practice, they lead to an increase in certain types of characters.

Some of these manuals refer to psychoanalytical concepts of motivation, for instance, to the conflict between id, ego, and superego; to drives, affects, internalised norms, repressed desires, defence mechanisms, psychopathological tendencies, and types such as the introvert, the extrovert, the neurotic, the narcissist, the sadist, or the masochist (e.g., Seger 1990; Blumenfeld 2006). Since the mid-1990s, however, another model seems to have become more influential in media practice: the Enneagram of Personality. Stemming from esotericism and human resource management, and viewed with scepticism by scientists, this model has nevertheless spread widely in storytelling courses and manuals, and is used by quite a few authors.¹⁵ In very general terms, the Enneagram is a description of nine personality types, distinguished primarily by the nature of their motivation: the perfectionist Reformer, the caring Helper, the competitive Status Seeker, the individualistic Artist, the analytic Thinker, the dependent Loyalist, the impulsive Generalist, the forceful Leader, and the reassuring Peacemaker (see Lee 2013: 91). These character types are connected to each other through the neat

¹⁵ One of the first imports of the Enneagram into the realm of film practice seems to be Condon 1994. More recent guides to screenwriting focusing on this model are Lee 2013 and Lyons 2020. The approaches of these and other authors differ slightly; I follow Lee's terminology. Hook et al. 2021 provide a review of the academic literature and testing of the model.

diagram of a circle crossed by star-shaped lines. Each of these types is endowed with everything writers crave: general wants, needs and flaws; behavioural tendencies; inner and outer conflicts, characteristic patterns of relationships and interactions with others; a potential for positive or negative developments; and a backstory that made them what they are.

To give an example, an Enneagram user would probably diagnose Rick Blaine as a 'Type Four'—an 'Artist' or romantic individualist. According to this diagnosis, Rick's main desire would be to stand out and be special to others (as to Ilsa and the microcosm of his café), and his main fear would be to lose his uniqueness and significance. His key flaws would be melancholy, self-pity (when thinking of Paris), arrogance, and envy of those who have what he lacks (a reason for refusing Ilsa and Victor the transit letters). His inner conflict would be characterised by dissatisfaction and mood swings. Under stress and during conflicts, he would withdraw and avoid others, or act impulsively. However, if he came to grips with his flaws, he could develop into a person who combines unique abilities with integrity and altruism, and his need for emotional balance and satisfaction could be fulfilled. This development would come about through his conflicts with the indecisive 'Loyalist' Ilsa, the aggressive Nazi 'Leader' Strasser, and the hedonistic 'Generalist' Renault. This tentative interpretation of Rick as an Enneagram type indicates several similarities with the analysis of his personality in Chapter 6, which was based on the empirical standard model of personality psychology, the Big Five. However, the Enneagram stresses the motives, interrelations, conflicts, and developments much more strongly, and it fits well with other storytelling tools like the want/need/ flaw model. That seems to make it attractive to some authors. The other side of the coin is, of course, that there is always something both arbitrary and schematic about such a typology.

Thematic Significance of Characters' Motivation and Identity

Characters' motivation as part of their personality serves as an interface not only to the plot, but also to the themes of a narrative. The core motives of the characters usually determine a film's central themes, which therefore often involve questions of human identity. In social psychology, identity is defined as 'the awareness of being a distinct individual with a personal life story, demonstrating in one's actions a certain consistency and finding a balance between individual demands and social expectations when dealing with others' (Abels 2006: 254). Identity is constructed when humans form an image of themselves by interacting with their social environments and work out a self-concept accompanied by feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Haußer 2002). When doing so, they try to find consistency in their traits and continuities in their life stories, to develop principles for the future, and to reconcile subjective inclinations and social requirements. Making sure of one's most important motives and attempting to harmonise them with a set of social roles is therefore crucial for

identity. Philosophers such as Harry Frankfurt (1988), Michael Quante (2002: 171–94), and Peter Bieri (2003: 381–434) explain the construction of identity primarily by the fact that we form second-order desires on the basis of an evaluative self-image. We want to have certain desires and do not want to have others because they fail to conform to our ideal of what we want to be.¹⁶ For example, someone could have a spontaneous desire to smoke, run away, show off, hoard money, seduce someone, or beat someone up. However, they could block these first-order desires, because entertain the second-order desire not to be a smoker, coward, braggart, miser, seducer, or thug. Instead, they could try to act according to their second-order desire to be or become a helpful, altruistic person. The network of such second-order desires, which are oriented toward ideal self-images, represent a core element of identity. In other words, identity is coupled to wanting and acting in a way that is considered coherent and is linked to a sense of the comprehensibility, manageability, and importance of one's lifeworld and tasks (Abels 2006: 441). At the same time, identity construction is connected to the norms and values of social groups and the wish for social recognition and a corresponding positive self-image.

Based on this conception of identity, the concepts of authenticity and integrity, also relevant in character analysis, can be understood more precisely as well. The ideal of *authenticity* entails being firmly grounded in a way of life and an evaluative self-image and gearing actions, wishes and convictions toward it without major fractions and deceptions, either intuitively or after a conscious assessment of one's own motives and their connections (pre-reflective vs reflective authenticity; Quante 2002: 192–95). In this sense, a person is authentic when they identify with their motives, assess them positively, and stand by them. The ideal of *integrity* requires even more (Pollmann 2005: Chapter 2). From the person's own perspective, it also entails moral rectitude, psychic integration, and a sense of wholeness in addition to loyalty to one's own life principles and values; from an external perspective, all this is linked to an impression of incorruptibility, respectability, and coherence.

A stable identity as well as authenticity and integrity are not a matter of course, but guiding ideals that are difficult to achieve. According to the aforementioned philosophers, a prerequisite for approaching these ideals is a clarifying reflection on one's own volitions and self-images. In this respect, characters have important psychological and social functions. They can contribute to reflection processes by embodying forms and conflicts of identity formation and serving as role models and counter-images for the audience. They can help spectators to better understand, articulate and appropriate their own wishes.¹⁷ In this way, they can contribute to the viewers' identity formation, for which there is ample evidence from a variety of disciplines.¹⁸

16 Similarities with the psychoanalytic concept of the ego ideal can be found here, though without the genetic explanation it provides.

17 For more on the articulation and appropriation of wishes, see Bieri 2003: 384.

18 Numerous theorists in media education as well as in literary, media, communication, and cultural studies explicitly or implicitly assume a connection between viewer and character identities (see, for example, Mikos 1998). Norman Holland points out that readers orient themselves toward their own

Casablanca represents a suitable example to show how characters can provide viewers with resources for identity formation. From this perspective, the film tells how Rick Blaine undergoes an identity crisis and struggles to gain integrity. This problem is quite common for Hollywood heroes, but it is untypical that for an extended period of time Rick does not pursue a clearly defined outer goal. As a result, his story focuses even more on the identity problem, which in other films is more often linked to actions aimed at an external goal.

The relationships between motivation, perspective, imaginative closeness, and affect will be deepened later (Chapter 13 and Chapter 14). Firstly, the following chapters will address the character constellation (Chapter 10) and then characters' symbolic and symptomatic properties (Chapter 11 and Chapter 12). Their motivation represents an important foundation in these areas, as well.

9.4 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions about Action and Motivation

1. Is the character's behaviour motivated more by psychology or by textual or narrative functions? Does this behaviour fulfil narrative functions without seeming comprehensible and reasonable according to folk-psychology? Are characters' actions inexplicable, does their behaviour seem absurd (such as in surrealist film)? If yes, what does this suggest?
2. What is the most important cause for changes in the character's situations? Their own actions and behaviour, the actions of other characters, or unintended results and effects of inanimate elements in the environment?
3. Which aspects of a character's decisive actions are represented, and when and where in the (filmic) text? Is information about the source, location, time, or motivation of an action withheld? What is the narrative function of this (e.g., generation of curiosity or suspense)?
4. Does the film steer the viewer's attention toward particular factors that might explain a character's behaviour? The character's past history, current situation, stable personality traits, general needs and drives, concrete fears and wishes, or specific intentions, goals, and plans? What effect does this produce (e.g., creating suspense, understanding, or rejection)? Is, for example, the guilt for a crime attributed to the perpetrator's personality, to their past, or to their environment?

'identity themes' during the process of reading (1992). By way of in-depth interviews, Jörg Herrmann pointed out the significance of media characters for identity-relevant orientations (2007). Gerhard Schulze attributes the choices of media made by various population groups to their classification in a social milieu and 'normal definition of existential problems', their 'subjective idea of general meaning' (Schulze 1997: 232).

5. Do a character's actions tend to be more rational, impulsive, akratic, or irrational? How conscious are the characters of their own motives? Is their behaviour propelled chiefly by practical rationality and conscious desires, by preconscious affects/emotions, routines, and vague ideas, or by unconscious drives, trauma, and suppressed wishes?
6. What are a character's concrete motivations for action? What needs, fears and wishes, goals, and plans represent the core of their motivation? How is their motivation system related to those of other characters? How can the constellation of characters' motives be described? In light of the character's situation, is it obvious to viewers which wishes the character does not, or cannot have for social or cognitive reasons?
7. On what level of Maslow's pyramid are the character's needs? Are these needs physical (survival, food, sleep), or do they involve social relationships, self-esteem, knowledge, beauty, transcendence, or self-actualisation? Does the central level of needs change in the course of the film?
8. How can the character's motives be classified in a social sense, such as in light of the self, partners, family, peer or other groups, or humanity? Do they wish something for themselves or for others? Do they want to hurt or help themselves or others? Are their social motives determined chiefly by altruism, individualism, cooperation, competition, aggression, sadism, masochism, or martyrdom? What effects could that have on the viewer's assessment of the character?
9. How easy or difficult is it to satisfy the character's wishes? What kind of obstacles do they face, how much conflict do they present? How does this affect the film's plot and subject matter? Are there any wishes that are not relevant to the plot, but are relevant for analysis?
10. What are the character's outer goals? Are these all-or-nothing goals or is achieving them in part possible? What does this mean for the viewers' expectations and the story's outcome? Are these goals achieved in whole or in part?
11. Does the character have a central goal that affects all their actions? What is it? Does this remain constant, or is it divided into changing partial goals? Does this goal involve striving after, retrieving, defending, or coping with something? Is it linked with typical plot patterns of searching, solving mysteries, change, pursuit, etc.? Does the character follow concrete plans that structure future actions and viewer expectations?
12. Are there key, long-term motives that determine the character's actions, identity, and personality? Is there a central outer goal (want), a key inner need, and a key inner flaw? If so, how are the want, need, and flaw related? In what way and at what point during the film are each of them established? Do they push the character in the same direction or pull them in opposite directions? What succeeds in the end? Are the character's central goals, needs, and flaws related to the back story?

13. How do the character's essential conflicts arise, and what kind of conflicts are they? What kind of antagonistic forces confront them? Are they the inner obstacles of the character, outer obstacles in the environment, or other characters' conflicting behaviours? If the last-mentioned is the case, what are these other characters' motives? How far could the character fall, and what do they risk with their actions?

14. Do characters show inner motivational conflicts? Are these conflicts limited to individual actions or are they expressed in a variety of situations throughout the film and anchored in the character's personality? Are the character's inner conflicts related to their needs, identity, ego ideals, integrity, or authenticity, and if so, how?

10. Character Constellations as Social and Aesthetic Systems

The previous chapters of this book focused first on the individual character, then on their motives, their actions in the plot, and their interactions with other characters. This chapter now turns to the entire *character constellation* of a film: the system of all characters and all their social and aesthetic relationships. A film's *dramatis personae* includes main, secondary, and minor characters, jointly acting groups, and personalised narrators (which may be present only as a voice-over, as in *Suzhou River*).¹ The size of the ensemble varies, from one-person films, such as *All Is Lost* with its lone sailor, to epics, such as *Gandhi* with 430 speaking roles and an estimated 300,000 extras (Robertson 2001: 83, 101). The character constellation, however, is more than a mere set of characters—it is a system, a complex network that comprises all the relationships between them: relationships of attention, of similarities and contrasts, of seeing and hearing, of interaction and communication, of desires and plans, of bonds and conflicts, of power and values, of perspective and affect. Character constellations are thus more comprehensive than character networks examined in digital humanities, where all characters' interaction patterns in a narrative are visualised using computer-extracted data (Moretti 2011; Labatut and Bost 2019: 2, 54). In addition to interactions, the concept of character constellation encompasses many further relationships between characters; we could think of it as a layering of several networks. Because of its complexity, it may be more suitable for the close interpretation of selected works than for the application of automatic methods to large corpora. Analysing and visualising constellations can help us understand character roles, representational structures, value systems, and narrative strategies, and compare individual works, genres, or small sets of films with other narratives or social networks in real life.

1 Characters that are just mentioned in dialogue without being perceptible and having causal effects are not part of the constellation. Pfister speaks of 'backstage characters' (1988: 225–26) here. The matter is unclear with characters that appear only as topics of conversation but still take on their own contours through extensive thematisation, such as the absent men in George Cukor's *The Women*. Whether a narrator or narrative instance belongs to a character constellation depends mostly on its reappearance as a recognisable person. I do not intend to decide here whether heterodiegetic narrators can also be considered part of the constellation. Nesting of the narrative levels establishes a particular communicative relation of telling/being told between narrators and other characters, which normally excludes other relations (such as interaction in a shared world and time).

Based on Chapter 3, it can be assumed that in the minds of the viewers, the character constellation is represented by a text-based mental model which develops in the following way: at each stage of the film, the viewers form a situational model that includes, among other things, sub-models of the characters and their relationships.² When these models are linked in memory through cognitive completion, abstraction, and generalisation, mental representations of the relational structures of the characters across the situations emerge. This means that viewers reconstruct the character constellation based on perceiving and imagining individual characters and their more local, changing *scenic configurations*. By this, I understand the arrangement of characters present in a certain temporal segment of the film (a shot, scene, or sequence).³ Characters belong to a scenic configuration when they can be seen or heard (on or off screen) in the relevant phase, or when their presence can be inferred from the context, such as other characters' behaviour (e.g., the invisible characters in *Hollow Man*).⁴

Both situational configurations and overarching constellations of characters are analytical abstractions that simplify and freeze the complex, changing dynamics of the film to make it accessible to interpretation. During reception, of course, both the characters' relationships and the viewers' mental models develop in a dynamic process. Scenic configurations represent only a certain temporal section from this constant appearance and disappearance of various characters during the narrative. And character constellations even depend on a generalisation over the entire film, with the aim to represent a static overview of the entire system of characters. The scenic configuration thus resembles a snapshot that isolates only a specific moment of this process, and the character constellation resembles an abstract diagram showing only its most crucial and permanent structures.

The essential structures and changes in characters' relationships can be traced by analysing the sequence of configurations over the course of the film, from scene to scene. Most scenes focus on one to five characters, though the spectrum ranges from landscape shots without any characters to ensemble configurations with dozens of characters or more. The duration of configurations can vary from seconds—as in the title sequence of *The Simpsons*, in which Bart dashes past dozens of characters on his skateboard—to the entire length of the film, such as in certain chamber pieces.⁵ From the sequence of

2 See the descriptions in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5 and Ohler 1994; Persson 2003. Due to limited cognitive capacities, groups of characters that act only collectively (as in many of Sergei Eisenstein's films) are presumably perceived as units.

3 Polheim employs the terminology in precisely the opposite manner (1997: 12): In this work of his, 'configuration' denotes the entirety of characters that appear in a drama, while 'constellation' refers to their changing situational arrangements. However, Pfister's usage seems to be more common (see Asmuth 1997a, b; Platz-Waury 1997a). To avoid confusion, I will speak of 'scenic configurations'.

4 In the case of theatre, Pfister names the characters' presence on the stage as a criterion for being part of a scenic configuration (1988: 235).

5 The 'camera' in the opening credits of *The Simpsons* follows Bart and then successively singles out individual characters as it crosses paths with them, as they are all on Springfield's streets at the same time. This could also be termed one configuration, depending on which criterion is given more weight: the characters' presence at one place at the same time, the characters interacting with each other, or the camera picking out parts of the space.

configurations, a *configuration profile* of the entire film can be reconstructed, showing how often, when and in what combinations the various characters appear. *Casablanca*, for example, contains a remarkable number of ensemble scenes in which many characters appear together (often in Rick's café), from which the scenes in which Rick is seen alone or only with Ilsa stand out. Rick is an example of a *scenically dominant character* who is seen in most scenes and with more characters together than any other. A certain degree of *scenic distance* between two characters results from how many of the configurations they appear in together (Pfister 1988: 237). Some characters seem to be inseparable and are almost always seen together (like Laurel and Hardy), while others never are.

Analysing character configurations and constellations allows us to discover various kinds of relationships between them:

- Hierarchies of attention: main, secondary, and minor characters are portrayed in greater or lesser extent and receive varying amounts of attention.
- Similarities and differences between represented beings: characters are similar or different from each other in terms of their physicality, psyche, sociality, and behaviour, as well as if they are perceived and evaluated as attractive or not, good or evil (see Chapter 6).
- Social relationships and interactions: as represented beings, characters perceive each other, interact, and communicate with each other, and are linked by social goals, bonds, and conflicts (see Chapter 9).
- Artefact relationships: characters can also resemble or differ from each other as artefacts, for instance in terms of their realism, typification, complexity, staging, or acting style (see Chapter 7 and Chapter 8).
- Plot functions: more specifically, characters are interrelated through their narrative functions, for instance as protagonists, antagonists, and other functional roles in the story and plot.
- Narration and focalisation: finally, characters can also be narrators or narratees on several communicative levels of the film, and they stand in relations of focalisation or perspective to each other and to the audience.

These various relationships between characters as depicted beings and artefacts are once again closely related to each other; for example, diegetic or symbolic relations between characters can find sensual forms of expression and correspondences on the artefact level (see Figure 38). Some of these webs of relationships between characters are explored below, except for relations of narration and focalisation, which will be revisited in more detail in Chapter 13. For now, suffice it to say that the representation of a character can be attributed to various narrative sources, including diegetic narrators who belong to the same storyworld (as in *Fight Club*) and non-diegetic narrators who exist outside the storyworld (as in *Barry Lyndon*). Both can also be considered characters.



Fig. 38 This shot from *I Heart Huckabees* demonstrates how film can show and comment on the complex relationships among characters at various levels simultaneously. The ‘existential detective’ Bernard (Dustin Hoffman, on the right) is trying to convince his reluctant protégé Tommy (Mark Wahlberg) of the New Age truism that everything is connected—and for a moment the characters seem to dissolve and merge on the visual level. (Dir. David O. Russell, *I Heart Huckabees*, 2005, Qwerty Films/Scott Rudin Productions, USA. All rights reserved.)

10.1 Hierarchies of Attention: Main and Secondary Characters

Classifying characters into a hierarchy according to their importance in a constellation is a widespread approach, and a distinction is usually made without reflection between main characters, secondary characters, minor characters, and extras (e.g., Frensham 1996: 7273). Usually, main characters are defined by the criteria of their plot function, their length of performance and the amount of their dialogue, but these are not the only factors. For example, none of these criteria truly apply to Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*, although he is indisputably a main character and Marlon Brando’s name appears first in the opening credits: Kurtz appears shortly before the film’s conclusion, says little, and has only limited influence on the plot. Another example that refutes the length of the performance as a criterion is the character of Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Lecter takes up less than twenty-five minutes (or 21%) of the film’s time, but Anthony Hopkins won the Academy Award for Best Actor for this role.

In view of many such cases, we should therefore say more clearly and precisely that positioning characters in hierarchies is ultimately based on assumptions about how much *attention* the audience is supposed to pay them. A variety of narrative and aesthetic factors can contribute to drawing attention to a character:

- the frequency, duration and intensity of their representation;
- the highlighting through cinematic techniques (e.g., lighting, framing, editing or sound);
- the star image of the actor;

- the character's causal role in the plot, their agency and density of interaction and conflict with others;
- their unusualness or deviation from notions of normality;
- the perspectivisation of the storyworld through the character (as focaliser);
- the attention other characters pay to a character;
- the degree of the audience's affective involvement with the character; and
- their symbolic and symptomatic significance and contribution to the meaning of the film.

For example, Colonel Kurtz, as a deserter, murderer, philosopher, and despot, is an extremely uncommon character, who stands out visually, due to his massive body, shaved head, and Brando's unmistakable face. Kurtz is played by a superstar and is staged dramatically by means of lighting, setting, etc. Long before he appears, he becomes the focus of the others, above all the protagonist, Captain Willard. Because he dominates the film's conclusion, the recency effect intensifies the impression he makes. His brief dialogues are conspicuous, poetic, and convey crucial content ('The horror!'). Kurtz has a symbolic dimension and is key to the film's theme. Together, these factors make Kurtz a main character.

The numerous gradations of attention hierarchy among a film's secondary and minor characters also depend on different factors. For example, secondary characters may occupy positions near the centre of the hierarchy of attention either for their conspicuousness or for their plot function (see the description of the types of the 'card' and the 'ficelle' in Harvey 1970: 52–73). A 'ficelle' character may be average, inconspicuous, and typified, but perform essential functions in the plot, for example, as an informant and helper like the assistants who accompany the detective protagonists in many older crime series. In contrast, other characters ('cards') get much more attention than would be necessary for their plot function, because they stand out through picturesque uniqueness such as Dickens's Mr. Micawber, or through visual spectacle such as the peaceful dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*. That the specific kind of attention is important in character hierarchies is exemplified by the many female characters who are exhibited as erotic objects for the male gaze, but who are not given any relevant agency in the plot.

Guided by the film's distribution of information and the viewers' mental dispositions, attention constantly shifts between the different characters of a configuration. Camera movements and editing draw attention to specific characters and details, such as meaningful glances and gentle touches. Attentional shifts can also occur during static shots (and be detected by eye-tracking), for example, when characters move abruptly, when they change position from the background to the foreground, or when they begin to speak in dialogue scenes. The viewers' attention can also unintentionally stray from narratively important and cinematically highlighted, but boring characters

and get caught on characters who are subjectively perceived as more interesting or attractive. Such unintended factors should be taken into account when reconstructing the reception of empirical audiences.

The above differentiations also help to clarify some relevant concepts that are often confused, namely main character, protagonist, and hero. *Main characters* occupy a dominant position within a hierarchy of attention due to any of the factors mentioned above. In contrast, *protagonists* are defined by their narrative function. They pursue the central goal in the central conflict of the story and are the essential driving force in its causal chain of events. The original meaning of the Greek word ('first actor') corresponds with its modern usage in today's screenwriting manuals: 'In the basic dramatic circumstance of "somebody wants something very badly and is having difficulty getting it," the "somebody" is the protagonist' (Howard and Mabley 1995: 23). Finally, the term '*hero*' or '*heroine*' is particularly ambiguous and includes normative connotations.⁶ Sometimes the term simply refers to the protagonist, but more narrowly, heroes can be defined as characters with well above average physical, psychological or moral abilities and virtues who perform significant prosocial acts in the story.

Not only are these terms often confused, but a prevailing narrative convention virtually demands their coincidence: according to this, the protagonist is both the main character, a hero, and the main focaliser (the person whose perspective on the storyworld is to be largely shared by the audience). In many narratives this is indeed true. A hero in the emphatic sense—such as Wonder Woman—is usually also the main character, the protagonist, and the moral and perspectival centre of the film. However, this is by no means always the case; these qualities can also be distributed among different characters in order to achieve certain effects. For instance, protagonists can be anti-heroes who lack the hero's physical, mental and moral qualities, their prosocial actions and their social status, like Johnny the Dropout in *Naked*, Aileen Wuornos in *Monster*, or the eponymous characters of *Bad Lieutenant* and *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick*. Even a brutal murderer can be a protagonist (*Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*). Accordingly, antagonists can also be positive characters in such cases, and even heroes.

Moreover, the protagonist is not necessarily also the main character who receives the most attention (and vice versa). In the frame story of *Citizen Kane*, the reporter Thompson is the protagonist (with the central goal of finding out who Kane was) but not the main character, and Charles Foster Kane is the main character but not the protagonist. In *Uncle Boonmee*, the eponymous main character is mostly passive, while

6 For more on the concept and typology of the hero, see Wulff 1999d. Dramatica defines the hero as a combination of protagonist and perspectivisation instance or representative of the viewers, and links this with criticism of this kind of conception: 'A hero is a blended character who does two jobs: move the plot forward and serve as a surrogate for the audience. When we consider all the characters other than a Protagonist who might serve as the audience's position in a story, suddenly the concept of a hero becomes severely limited. It is not wrong, just limited'; 'Hero Is a Four Letter Word' (Phillips and Huntley 1999).

alternating other characters become protagonists of brief plot episodes, including Boonmee's past-life selves (a water buffalo, a princess), his long-lost son, his sister-in-law, his nephew, and his nurse.

Which hierarchical relationships exist between a film's characters, which functions the characters perform, and which of them are the protagonists is often clear, though not always from the beginning. While the biggest star is normally cast in the main role, there are some interesting exceptions, such as *Apocalypse Now*. Postclassical Hollywood cinema sometimes even employs the convention consciously to deceive the audience. When a major star is cast in a certain role, the viewers' expectation that this is the main character can then be spectacularly and surprisingly disappointed. In *Scream*, the most well-known member of the cast, Drew Barrymore, is killed in the opening sequence. And just when Samuel Jackson, the only star in *Deep Blue Sea*, begins to shine in the hero role while delivering a dramatic speech, he is torn apart by sharks. Kristin Thompson describes another play on character hierarchy in *Alien* (1999: 283–306). She compares the narrative of this sci-fi/horror thriller to what she calls the 'shooting gallery plot': a collective of roughly equal protagonists is introduced, then one character after another is killed by a hostile force. A grim atmosphere suggests the possibility that none of the astronauts will survive. Moreover, that Lieutenant Ripley, played by then little-known Sigourney Weaver, will be the film's heroine is only gradually revealed after more likely candidates for the role, such as Captain Dallas (the then better-known Tom Skerrit), have all been killed by the Alien. This gradual focusing of attention on Ripley and her revelation as the true heroine heightens the film's level of suspense and surprise.

In short, although there is a strong convention that the centre of attention in a film coincides with the centre of its action and focalisation (and often also with its moral and emotional centre), these centres can shift, or they can be spread out among several different characters. Moreover, they can pass from one character to another, as in multiplot films such as *Short Cuts* or *Code inconnu/Code Unknown*. Thus, narratives with stable hierarchies of attention (such as *Casablanca*) can be distinguished from those with changeable hierarchies.

10.2 The Orchestration of Characters and Their Traits: Analogies and Contrasts

Whether a main or secondary character, hero or antihero, every character in a constellation is also perceived in comparison to other characters and in light of their similarities and differences. This comparative perception contributes to characterisation, suggests alternative ways of being in the world, and deepens the film's plot and themes. While developing a character model, viewers relate it to other models, and traits that are perceived as strikingly different or similar receive a greater amount of attention. The contrasts or parallels give these traits a prominent position in the mental model and invite thematic inferences.

The result of these dynamic processes of reception is a multi-layered system of different features. As represented beings, the individual characters are defined by their physical, psychological, social, and behavioural traits. As artefacts, they are characterised by their narrative and aesthetic form, such as a recurring way of camera movement or lighting, and by artefact qualities such as realism, consistency, or typification. This dual internal system of features of the individual character is part of the larger external system of features of the character constellation as a whole, which includes all properties of all characters. The individual characteristics can be thought of as atoms, the characters as molecules composed of these atoms, and the constellation of characters as a complex compound composed of these molecules. For example, a particular protagonist may be powerless and individualised, while powerful and typified characters predominate in the constellation.

By looking only at the 'atoms', the traits of the characters, we can already recognise the general *trait spectrum* of the character constellation. A list of the most relevant trait dimensions of a film's characters can provide a first approximation of what is important in its storyworld and theme. In action films, for example, such a list of traits might include aggressiveness, strength and practical cleverness; in melodramas, longings, family roles and social status; in satires, vices and weaknesses. Traits that are particularly common or prominent in a film often indicate its themes. However, the trait spectrum can also be examined to identify thematically relevant traits that are absent or marginalised in a film. For instance, women, minorities, the poor, and the elderly are still severely underrepresented in film and other media. The overview of the trait spectrum can thus also be used to specify the theme and ideology, the symbolic and symptomatic meaning of the film (see Chapter 11 and Chapter 12).

When the specific *trait systems* of individual characters are compared—going beyond a mere list of their key traits—interesting patterns can often be found, such as structural correspondences between antithetical characters. A comparison of characters' traits can help position them more precisely within the constellation and more clearly grasp their specificity. More generally, similarities or contrasts between main characters may also highlight characteristic trait dimensions of a certain film, its topic, or genre. Importantly, characters can not only be compared as represented beings, but also as artefacts in terms of their cinematic form, general artefact qualities, and overall character conceptions, for instance, regarding acting style, framing, and other modes of representation, as well as the degree of their realism, individualisation, consistency, transparency, and dimensionality (see Part IV). Characters in a constellation may be very different in terms of their corporeality, psyche, and social life, but similar due to their manner of representation, such as the minor characters in *Lola rennt/Run Lola Run*, whose stories are told in rapid sequences as if in a photo novel. Many films work with contrasts between individualised and typified characters in their constellation. In Moretti's *La stanza del figlio/The Son's Room* for example, all family members are individualised, while the father's psychotherapy patients are typified.

Stereotyping often works through specific connections of characters' diegetic traits and their artefact qualities. As represented beings, characters that belong to a certain group are often given physical, mental, and social traits that conform to a stereotype, such as the Latino criminal in Hollywood cinema. These stereotypical beings are further reduced to the type by their artefact qualities. They tend to be positioned not as protagonists but as antagonists or secondary characters in the plot, and they are represented in stereotyping forms of acting, camerawork, lighting, editing, or sound design. A female star may always appear in glamour lighting, while the male star appears in harsher, high-contrast lighting. Or the perspective of white main characters is conveyed through the camera, while that of Black secondary characters is not. In mainstream cinema, members of minority groups portrayed in a stereotypical manner often contrast with individualised main characters that belong to the dominant group. Pleasantville comments ironically on this: the character groups are separated from each other on both the level of story and of the film form, in that only one group appears in colour and the other in black and white.

But let us first concentrate on contrasts and similarities on the level of the depicted world and its inhabitants (see Chapter 6). Basically, all physical, mental and social traits of characters can be paralleled or contrasted here. These include, for example, bodily characteristics (tall/small), social status (rich/poor), personality traits (brave/cowardly), moral orientation (good/evil), abilities (skilled/unskilled), motives, behaviour, conflicts, or past history. The contrasting or congruent dimensions can be based on anthropological constants (such as the physical and mental differences between children and adults), or they can be specific to certain historical epochs, such as the contrasts between landowners and farmhands in *Die Siebtelbauern/The Inheritors* or between Mods and Rockers in *Quadrophenia*.

Some examples of striking similarities or parallels are the women whose lives are mysteriously connected in *La double vie de Véronique/The Double Life of Véronique*, the enigmatic doppelgangers in *Vertigo* (that turn out to be the same person), or the twin gynaecologists in *Dead Ringers*. Conspicuous contrasts can involve, for example, body size and shape (*David and Goliath*), standards of attractiveness (*Beauty and the Beast*), skin colour (*Do the Right Thing*), age (*Harold and Maude*), social class (*The Prince and the Pauper*), or morals (*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*). Such comparative relationships between characters are revealed through externally visible features, meaningful names, explicit dialogues, symmetrical relationships, and in many further ways. Usually, similarities and contrasts are not quite as obvious, and there are various degrees of explicitness. For example, the differences and similarities between the criminals Max (Jean Gabin) and Riton (René Dary) in *Touchez pas au Grisbi* are on a common middle level. The two are loyal friends and strictly observe a code of honour among thieves. In this, they differ from the unscrupulous Angelo (Lino Ventura). However, Riton's rashness and uncertain vanity underscores Max's precision and calm self-confidence.

While physical differences are immediately visible, the above example also shows that, at least in terms of psyche, sociality, and behaviour, the following applies: 'A requirement for the antithetical nature of characters is that they can be compared' (Lotman 1993: 359). Characters must have something in common so that the differences stand out, or they must be depicted in similar situations in which the differences in their behaviour become obvious. Doppelgänger motifs or stories of good and evil twins intensify the tension between physical sameness and differences in personality. Vice versa, there are stories about soulmates in antithetical bodies (*Beauty and the Beast*). Many characters have some similar personality traits so that differences in others seem even more drastic. The master thief and the supercop in *Heat* are both lonely perfectionists, but on opposite sides of the law. At times, the comparison of characters is spelled out so that not a viewer would miss it. This is rather common in Steven Spielberg's films. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the villain Belloq says to the hero, Indiana Jones, an adventurous treasure hunter like himself, 'You and I are very much alike ... I am a shadowy reflection of you'. In *Schindler's List*, the similarity between Oskar Schindler and the concentration camp commander Amon Goeth is also thematised in dialogue. Both men are bonvivants, but Schindler's humanity contrasts with Goeth's cruelty.

For now, it can be said that a film's character constellation is normally structured by similarities and contrasts between individual characters as represented beings and artefacts. Manfred Pfister speaks of 'qualitative contrasting and corresponding relationships' between characters (1988: 227–32) and regards them as 'clusters of differing characteristics' (internal trait system) that assume a certain place in a 'matrix of opposing characteristics' (external trait system) (ibid.: 231). Rather than a matrix or chemical compound, one can also compare the character constellation to a symphony orchestra and speak of an *orchestration* of characters (Schütte 1999: 36; Egri 1960: 114–18). This musical image underlines additional aspects that relate to certain effects. Accordingly, each character resembles a certain instrument with a specific tone quality, volume, and pitch, which evokes certain experiential qualities. The overall effect of the character constellations depends on how the instruments are coordinated. A constellation made up only of characters that are all rough-and-ready show-offs would be like an orchestra comprised of only percussionists (Egri 1960: 114). Often, the film's setting already limits the range of characters' features and thus the range of the orchestration. In the German thriller *Die Sieger*, all main characters belong to a special-operations police unit composed of athletic white men of similar age (Schütte 1999: 36). In such cases, it becomes difficult to prevent viewers from confusing characters or getting bored.

The importance of character orchestration for the viewer's overall experience and for the film's thematic statements can be illustrated with a thought experiment. Imagine a war film in which all the characters of group A are typecast heroes: handsome, brave, selfless and determined. All the soldiers of group B, on the other hand, are cruel, ugly and deceitful cowards with evil intentions. In short, it is a crude propaganda film. As a first step, the

spectrum of characteristics of group A could now be expanded to include further types of soldiers such as the grumpy old man, the super tough female fighter, the frightened boy, and the funny fat cook. This would increase the possibilities for identification and lead to a somewhat more subtle propaganda that appears more varied and 'realistic', although all the characters are still types. A third step, value-related characterisation could be implemented so that the characters cross the boundaries of groups and types. If, for example, some of the soldiers of group A are also deceitful and cruel, this could add a critical element to the film, and if the soldiers of group B also have positive human traits, the film begins to lose some of its clear propaganda function. If, in a final step, positive and negative traits were equally distributed on both warring parties, this could lead to viewers being ready to feel a more balanced sympathy for both sides. (Even then, however, the film could still be biased and would not have to be an anti-war film.⁷)

This schematic example indicates the aesthetic and ideological importance of orchestrating, contrasting, and parallelising characters in a constellation. Scholars and media practitioners have developed various tools for comparing individual characters and analysing their orchestration. I will briefly outline three of them: the structuralist model of binary oppositions, Frensham's 'counter character chart', and Schütte's model of a graduated field of traits.

In structuralist analyses, characters' similarities and differences are often shown in a simple list of *binary oppositions*, such as in the following comparison of the protagonist and antagonist in *Rocky IV* (Hoff 1996):⁸

Rocky	Drago
+ boxer	+ boxer
+ muscular	+ muscular
+ independent	– independent
+ emotional	– emotional
+ humane	– humane

In this film, Rocky represents the 'free' (capitalist) United States, Drago the 'totalitarian' (communist) USSR. Since many oppositions are linked with culturally specific values and political positions in this way, theorists in cultural studies also employ the concept of binary oppositions for critical analysis of media production (e.g., Fiske 1997). Often, they go beyond individual films and examine recurring relationship patterns of character constellations in larger text groups (see Pfister 1988: 231–32), such as Hollywood cinema or the genre of the boxing film.

However, the structuralist model, with its emphasis on binarism, does often not distinguish between different kinds of oppositions. An opposition between two traits is

7 There is a wide range of further filmic strategies with ideological effects. For example, group B could be shown less often or given an unpleasant musical leitmotif.

8 Numerous comparable examples can be found in the literature; one from the field of British dramas is provided in Pfister 1988: 231; one for US television in Fiske 1997: 132.

present whenever a character cannot possibly possess both simultaneously. But according to philosophical logic, there are several possibilities for this. Structuralism often seems to focus on contrary or polar opposites, where the traits lie at opposite ends of a scale: ‘rich’ and ‘poor’. However, there are also contradictory oppositions, where one trait negates another (‘rich’ and ‘not rich’), as well as graduated differences (‘rich’ and ‘relatively wealthy’).

Some models from screenwriting manuals allow these different, sometimes gradual kinds of oppositions and attempt to represent the relationships between not just two but many characters. Ray Frensham suggests contrasting the most important traits of the main characters in a table called the *counter character chart* (1996: 77). His example (Table 8) illustrates that the sitcom *Roseanne* tends to portray the male family members as easy-going, the female members (except Roseanne’s sister Jackie) as dominant and sharp-tongued.

Roseanne	female	married (wife)	very dominant	sarcastic	...
Dan	male	married (husband)	calm	...	...
Becky	female	single (daughter)	dominant	...	...
Darlene	female	single (daughter)	dominant	cynical	...
D.J.	male	single (son)	relaxed	...	...
Jackie	female	single (sister)	submissive	...	...
...	...	...	...	...	...

Table 8 Counter character chart of the sitcom *Roseanne* according to Frensham (1996: 77)

A more precise overview of trait constellations can be achieved with Oliver Schütte’s *graduated model* (1999: 36–37). The following example compares the main characters of Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* in terms of key trait dimensions. The melodrama tells the story of two single mothers, African-American Annie and European-American Lora. Annie is hired by Lora as a cook and nanny, looking after Lora’s daughter Susie and her own child Sarah Jane. Lora rejects an awkward marriage proposal from her beau Steve, preferring to focus on her career, and becomes a Broadway star. Susie and Sarah Jane develop into teenagers, and both come into conflict with their mothers. When Lora gets back together with Steve, Susie also falls in love with him and must learn that she has no chance with him. The light-skinned Sarah Jane denies her dark-skinned mother Annie, lives as a white woman and moves to the big city to sing in nightclubs. Annie misses her daughter deeply and dies of a broken heart. At her funeral, all the remaining characters reconcile with each other (this bittersweet ending seems—as so often with Sirk—suspiciously artificial).

The main conflicts and themes of the film concern the women’s choices to focus either on career or family, as well as their intersectionally different ways of dealing with discrimination and social status. The first theme is conveyed primarily through Lora, the second through Annie and Sarah Jane. Diagram 23 shows how a comparative overview of the character constellation can be made, highlighting the latter two characters. First,

the key feature dimensions of the main characters are identified, resulting in a field of gradual oppositions (the numbers in the top row denote gradual differences between oppositions). All characters can be located and compared within these dimensions.⁹

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
fatalistic, unambitious	Annie			Susie	Steve		Sarah Jane, Lora	ambitious
altruistic	Annie		Susie		Steve	Lora	Sarah Jane	egocentric
self-sacrificing	Annie			Steve	Susie		Sarah Jane, Lora	striving for self- actualisation
morally principled	Annie	Steve	Susie	Lora		Sarah Jane		not morally principled
humourless, serious		Annie, Steve, Lora				Sarah Jane		humorous
dull, unimaginative			Annie	Steve, Lora	Susie		Sarah Jane	spirited, lively
thoughtful, deliberate	Annie	Lora	Steve			Susie	Sarah Jane	impulsive
warm-hearted	Annie	Sarah Jane	Susie			Lora		cold
poor		Annie, Sarah Jane	Susie Steve, Lora, Susie (exposition)			Steve, Lora, Susie (end)		rich
'feminine'	Annie, Lora	Susie, Sarah Jane					Steve	'masculine'
woman as mother	Annie						Lora, Susie, Sarah Jane	woman as lover, part of a couple
old		Annie	Steve, Lora			Susie, Sarah Jane		young
dark-skinned	Annie			Sarah Jane			Lora, Susie, Steve	light-skinned

Diagram 23 The orchestration of characters and the constellation of their traits in Sirk's *Imitation of Life*, focusing on the comparison of Annie (dotted line) and her daughter Sarah Jane (dashed line)

9 The relevant traits and positioning of the characters are only determined intuitively here, though they could be substantiated more closely with the character-analysis devices developed previously. That would reveal a few of the difficulties of binary models. The oppositions as such can be questionable (woman as mother/woman as lover). Some traits show successive gradations (humour), while others involve an either-or (employment).

This type of diagram allows for a more detailed analysis of the character constellation. It shows that the orchestration of the characters in *Imitation of Life* encompasses a wide range of different characteristics in many dimensions, and that many characters have such divergent traits that the potential for conflict in the story increases dramatically. Even characters who are similar in most respects, such as Lora and Steve, are opposites in some crucial ways, such as Lora's and Steve's irreconcilable views on the role and career of women (not included in the diagram). Other characters are extremely different throughout. Particularly striking is the contrast between Annie and her daughter Sarah Jane (highlighted by bolding and vertical lines in the diagram). While the mature, staid, religious, and modest Annie seems to accept her subordinate role as a housekeeper and a person of colour in a racist society, the young, impulsive, and ambitious Sarah suffers so much from this discrimination that she denies being her Black mother's daughter. The conflict between mother and daughter is thus primarily based on their discriminatory environment and personality-related reactions to it. Their traits largely correspond to two contrasting African-American stereotypes: the submissive 'Mammy' and the 'Tragic Mulatto' (see Bogle 2004). However, this stereotyping is put into perspective by the film in that these are central, to some extent individualised characters whose behaviour and development the film attributes to their social situation and their specific personality rather than their race. One could say that Sirk's melodrama tries to show how the two women are literally forced into widespread stereotypes through mechanisms of social discrimination.

Such an approach to interpretation might suggest how the three models that have been presented can be employed for character-constellation analysis. Each of them has certain advantages. The structuralist schema of oppositions is the simplest; Schütte's graphic model is the most detailed; and Frensham's counter character chart can sometimes be a useful compromise. Depending on the goal of analysis, one can choose one of these models, but their heuristic character should certainly be kept in mind. The more complex the characters, the more difficult it will be to fit them into such schemata. Characters who undergo significant change, who behave in contradictory or variable ways, or whose traits are only vaguely suggested, cannot be positioned easily, or only in the context of certain configurations but not the whole narrative. Provided such difficulties are considered, the models can still be helpful in the analysis. They also make it easier to grasp additional aspects of orchestrating constellations: characters can be grouped or isolated from each other, and they can be deliberately set up in relation to one another as contrasting or parallel characters.

Characters can be *grouped* based on significant similarities, and they can be *isolated* within a configuration or constellation through contrasts with all other characters (Schneider 2000: 78–79). Viewers normally attempt to keep their mental models of grouped characters similar and assign them to a common type, while isolated characters tend to receive a greater amount of attention and be individualised. Sometimes, the isolation or grouping of characters is already reflected in a film's title, as in the German

comedy *Alone Among Women/Allein unter Frauen*, whose isolated macho protagonist is forced to share an apartment with a group of three women. *Imitation of Life* is much more complex. The film juxtaposes primarily European Americans and African Americans, as well as adults and young people, as groups. At the same time, both Annie and Sarah Jane are isolated in a significant regard (see the diagram). Annie is the oldest, the only selfless and fatalistic character, the only one with dark skin, and the only character that dies. Sarah Jane stands out in that she leads a double life, passing as a white nightclub dancer, and as the only character who violates several different social taboos simultaneously.

Another important strategy in the orchestration of character constellations is the establishment of contrast and parallel characters. Contrasting characters are often either opponents in a conflict—such as Annie and Sarah Jane—or secondary characters conceived as antithetical mirror images of the protagonists. Contrast characters can personify their adversary's wishes and aggressions (Tröhler 1995: 21) or point out alternative, unrealised possibilities (such as Banquo's loyalty in contrast to Macbeth's betrayal; Harvey 1970: 63). In *Good Will Hunting*, Will develops his mathematical brilliance and escapes the group of slackers, while his friends get hung up in their usual routine. As suggested above, the oppositions created by contrasting characters can be of various kinds. They can represent polar oppositions, such as Superman and his antagonists. A contrast character can also seem neutral when their counterpart possesses conspicuously positive or negative traits (contradictory opposite). Complementary characters, on the other hand, have traits, strengths, and weaknesses not possessed by their opposite (the extroverted and the introverted lovers in *Love*, etc.).

Other characters are set up in relation to one another as parallel characters. *Imitation of Life* is rich in parallels and symmetries. Despite their differences (age, race, social status), Lora and Sarah Jane are similar in that they are both prepared to give up their families and emotional ties for social advancement and self-actualisation in show business. Lora neglects Susie and rejects Steve, even though she loves him; Sarah Jane ends her relationship with her mother to keep her racial identity a secret. Lora's traits also partly parallel Annie's. They are both poor, unemployed single mothers at first, and their daughters slip away from them; these parallels suggest comparisons of their contrasting qualities: skin colour, efforts to further their careers, their social status, and conception of a mother's role. There are also similarities between their daughters, Susie and Sarah Jane. The two girls live like sisters, and both go through unhappy romances and powerful conflicts with their mothers, although they stand in contrast in terms of race, status, and temperament.

Contrast and parallelisation of characters often go hand in hand in this way. This method of characterisation and orchestration can already be recognised in early theatre, where parallel love affairs of servants and masters appear in countless comedies and operas. In the case of young heroes and their servants, such as Tamino and Papageno in Mozart's *Magic Flute*, burlesque contrasts with romance and comedy with an

elevated tone. Furthermore, odd couples in film are similar in many ways, while other elements are juxtaposed to form a contrast. The bad-tempered white cop (Nick Nolte) and the garrulous Black ex-convict (Eddie Murphy) in *48 Hrs.* could hardly be more different in terms of appearance and behaviour, but they have the same goal, the same antagonists, and similar ethical principles. *Thelma & Louise* are both victims of a male-dominated society and rebel against it, and also have similar dreams and goals, though they differ significantly in personality traits such as experience, independence, hedonism, and pragmatism.

The above examples already give some indication of the kind of features that are particularly relevant and interesting when comparing characters and analysing their constellations, namely traits that (a) are emphasised by narration and style, (b) are central to conflict and plot development and thus also to the me, or (c) concern psychosocial personality structures and (d) social groups, values, interests, and power relations. More complex and subtle films are often characterised precisely by the fact that they examine connections and interactions between psychology and sociology, personality and ideology. To understand such films better, we can draw on analytical categories introduced earlier in this book.

A clear example is *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins 2016). The film centres on Chiron, a gay Black man who grows up in misery as the child of a drug-addicted mother, bullied by his peers and betrayed by his first lover Kevin. After taking revenge on his tormentor, the school bully Terrell, and serving time in prison for it, the sensitive Chiron forces himself to adopt the habitus of an ultra-hard dealer, following the example of his mentor Juan. Through a renewed encounter with Kevin, he finally realises that his brutal façade does not correspond to his inner self and true needs. In the film, women appear only in secondary roles (among which Chiron's mother gets the most weight), whites only do in minor roles. The constellation concentrates on Black men and here on the three main characters Chiron, Kevin and Juan, the first two of whom are gay and the latter two dealers. This forms the basis for the theme of masculinity and homosexuality in a poor Black community marked by violence. As a child, adolescent and adult, the protagonist Chiron must deal not only with one personal antagonist, but with an entire series of different antagonistic forces. These include, in changing scenic configurations, his addicted mother, the school bully, most other teenagers, and Kevin, who turns against him under social pressure. This multiplicity of antagonists represents societal structures and norms in their various manifestations. In the last third of the film, Chiron has overcome his external conflicts but only by living the life of another person and denying his own personality and true needs. His inner conflict is thus traced back to his previous conflicts with society.

However, *Moonlight* by no means reduces personality to society, but instead explores the complex interrelationships between the two. A crucial means for this

is the implicit comparison between Chiron and Kevin as counter-characters in the film. Both are gay Black men in a deeply homophobic environment, but deal with it differently because of their personalities, which in turn has implications for their respective development. This could be further explored using the Big Five personality trait model discussed in Chapter 6, which distinguishes between the crucial personality dimensions of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Chiron is characterised as sensitive, anxious, and insecure, while Kevin appears optimistic, resilient, and full of self-confidence (neuroticism). The introverted Chiron prefers to avoid others, while the extroverted Kevin approaches them (extraversion). Chiron is very cautious of the unknown, Kevin on the other hand is curious and open to new experiences (openness). Chiron tends to be reserved, suspicious, or defensive toward others, while Kevin tends to be friendly and compassionate (agreeableness). Chiron behaves conscientiously, honestly, principled, and self-disciplined (to the point of self-transformation and self-denial), while Kevin tends to be easy-going and careless, to the point of dishonesty and disloyalty (conscientiousness). The two characters thus appear as opposites in each of the five central personality dimensions and accordingly deal differently with their homosexuality and the homophobic environment. Chiron initially tries to withdraw from it, while Kevin adapts to it and plays the heterosexual ladies' man to his peers. Ultimately, however, both are forced to pretend. Only this takes a different form, in Chiron's case that of a sudden and drastic break with his social role, his habitus and his physicality. Therefore, on the one hand, *Moonlight* shows how differently people with contrasting personalities react to comparable social situations and grievances such as stigmatisation and discrimination. At the same time, it suggests that Chiron's personality—his neuroticism, his introversion, his wariness of other people and the unknown—was already shaped by his social environment and earlier experiences.

As the brief examples hopefully show, character constellations are structured to produce narrative effects in many ways. They comprise a specific trait spectrum with meaningful focuses and gaps that contribute to establishing the film's theme and ideology (for example, *Imitation of Life* emphasises family roles, career, skin colour, and social position). Secondly, characters are grouped together (as mothers or daughters, whites or Blacks) or isolated from others and thereby highlighted (e.g., Sarah Jane as a rebel). Thirdly, constellations may juxtapose contrast and parallel characters (such as Annie and Sarah Jane) to make conspicuous comparisons, or they may establish various less conspicuous differences and similarities. Such strategies of orchestration serve a variety of purposes such as characterising individuals; creating conflict; injecting variety, suspense, curiosity; assigning values; evoking affective involvement; or elucidating themes (see Chapter 11 and Part VII).

10.3 Functional Relations: Characters' Roles in Narrative and Plot

So far, we explored three kinds of relationships between the characters in a constellation: the amount of attention they receive; their mode of representation as artefacts; and the relations between their physical, mental and social traits as represented beings. We now turn to the question of what functions the characters fulfil in relation to each other and especially in the plot. When theorists consider the character as an 'intersection of sets of structural functions' (Lotman 1993: 341), the question arises as to what these functions might be. In Chapter 7 we have already seen that they are of many different kinds. Characters have diegetic and narrative functions in that they contribute to shaping the plot and the storyworld. They serve a realism function in that they bring the depicted world into line with assumptions about reality. As objects of perceptual experience and contemplation, they assume aesthetic functions in conjunction with affect, information, and meaning functions. Finally, characters perform intertextual functions when they connect a media text to others, and transtextual functions when they refer to reality, which includes social, political, or commercial functions (see Chapter 11 and Chapter 12).

Most characters fulfil several of these functions simultaneously, so character constellations can be imagined as a complex network of functional interrelations. But characters' *plot functions* are especially relevant in narrative contexts, and most theorists concentrated on this aspect (see Chapter 2). Several approaches claim that all the manifold characters of narrative texts can be mapped onto certain functional positions of a universal pattern, a deep structure of interaction. In the following, I will present three different models of that: Algirdas Greimas's structuralist actantial model, the screenwriting program Dramatica's problem-solving model, and the typology of the hero's journey, set up by Hollywood consultant Christopher Vogler (based on Joseph Campbell's work). I will not endorse any of these three approaches but rather integrate their common and complementary features to develop a heuristic schema for analysing characters' plot functions and comparing the character constellations of different narratives.

Algirdas Greimas's influential classic starts from a linguistic basis to distinguish three pairs of functional plot roles: sender/receiver (*destinateur/destinataire*) are connected by an act of transmission (*communication*); subject/object (*sujet/objet*) by a certain desire (*désir*); and helper/opponent (*adjuvant/opposant*) by their role in furthering or opposing its fulfilment.¹⁰ The model can be broken down according to the following questions:

10 This is illustrated in, among other works, Greimas 1971/1966, 1972, 1974, 1982; overviews and exemplary applications can be found in Chandler 2001a; Rulewicz 2001; Tomasi 1988: 87ff.; Casetti and di Chio 1994: 174ff.; Koch 1991: 202ff.; Gardies 1993: 33–36. For a graphic illustration of the relationship, see Gardies 1993: 33.

- Sender: Who or what instigates or motivates the action?
- Receiver: Who benefits from the action?
- Subject: Who performs the action (or what causes the event)?
- Object: Who or what is the target object or goal of the action?
- Helper: Who or what helps the subject perform the action?
- Opponent: Who or what hinders the subject from performing the action?

These roles can be illustrated by simple stories: the king (sender) orders a knight (subject) and his squire (helper) to kill a dragon (opponent) and free the people (receiver) from the dragon's ravages (object). The story can also be abstract, such as the *grand récit* of Marxism: thanks to historical progress (sender), humankind (subject and receiver) will create a classless society (object) with the aid of the working class (helper) and against the resistance of the bourgeoisie (opponent) (Rulewicz 2001). Action is thus not necessarily to be understood as intentional deed, but rather as causation, and the actantial roles need not be performed by anthropomorphic characters, but collectives, animals, inanimate objects, natural forces, or abstract entities like fate can also be 'actants'. Moreover, one actantial role can be filled by several different characters, and vice versa, one and the same character can also take on several different actantial roles.¹¹

Greimas's model can be used to assign plot functions to characters, compare them, and reveal important relationships of interaction in the character constellation. For instance, it might be interesting to examine which actantial roles are filled by individual characters in certain films or genres, and which by abstractions such as 'fate' (in melodramas) or by collectives such as 'the working class' (in Eisenstein's films). Films can also be compared in this respect: what does it mean when the same historical event is depicted as an individual achievement in one film and as a collective achievement in another?

Greimas's model covers solely characters' *plot* functions, but not their other functions, and it leaves out characters who are not actants. For example, in the fairy-tale example above, there could also be a court jester who tells bad jokes, or a witch who observes events in her crystal ball and comments on them, but if they do not influence the main plot, they escape Greimas's schema. The peaceful dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* do not have a plot function, but are purely visual elements, an incarnation

11 The actions themselves are related to the modes of the actants' knowledge, wants, and abilities, which also underly the characters' motivation (see Chapter 9). Furthermore, the actants' syntactical deep structure is linked with a semantic structure of traits that can be implied through the nature of the action. "The 'thematic role' can be described as the content of a semantic field or complex of statements ('*parcours thématique*') that can be embodied by a person, is subsumable under a nominal lexeme, and can be given an actantial role' (Koch 1991: 204). Greimas (1982) terms the intersections of the actantial and thematic structures that contain an 'individuation seme' 'actors'. They, too, should not be confused with characters, but rather represent one of their constitutive foundations.

of the sublime, and a demonstration of technical skill. Such characters—observers, commentators, or objects of spectacle—do not fit within this conceptual framework. When Greimas's schema is considered more closely, further limitations turn up. Its linguistic foundations are disputable and difficult to apply to audiovisual media.¹² Moreover, comparison with alternative models raises the question of whether Greimas has in fact covered all possible plot functions.

For example, the Dramatica Pro screenwriting software proposes a different model, which is intended to help writers structure their stories effectively (Phillips and Huntley 1999). In Dramatica, storytelling is considered analogous to an imaginative problem-solving process that plays out in the human mind.¹³ Within this 'Story Mind', eight essential functional roles are distinguished, each with a physical side (bodily action) and a mental side (decision making). Their physical actions—working toward a goal, helping, hindering—drive the development of the plot, while their forms of decision making—plan and counterplan, logic and emotion—set basic modes of the action.

In simple narratives, many of the eight roles can be assigned to individual characters. In *Star Wars*, for example, Luke Skywalker is the Protagonist who wants to solve the story's problem and achieve its goal: delivering the plans to the rebels and destroying the Death Star. Sidekicks like the loyal robots R2D2 and C3PO trust in the protagonist and assist in the solution. The Guardian helps to achieve the goal by providing advice and setting a moral standard: Obi Wan Kenobi protects Luke and guides him in using the Force properly. Princess Leia, the rebels' cool-headed planner, takes the Reason Role of representing a logical view of the problem and a call to exercise self-control. In contrast, the hairy giant Chewbacca in the Emotion Role represents the affective, impulsive approach to problem-solving. On the opposing side, the Empire acts as the Antagonist, the main opponent or string puller, that considers how it can stop the protagonist and their helpers from achieving the goal. It represents the story's problem and puts any attempt to achieve the goal to the test. A contagonist such as Darth Vader, who embodies the Force's dark side, hinders the solution of the problem in a different

12 Greimas's arguments employ analogies to Tesnière's disputed dependency grammar, which assumes that a verb's valence in a sentence requires certain noun phrases—subjects or objects—syntactically.

13 This is explained in the digital theory book as follows: 'Dramatica is built on the concept that the structure and dynamics of a story are not random, but represent an analogy to a single human mind dealing with a problem. We call this concept the Story Mind. A Story Mind is not a character, the author, or even the audience, but the story itself. It's as if the audience's experience of a complete story were like looking inside of someone's head. Every act and scene, the thematic progression and message, the climax, plus all the characters and all that they do represent the parts and functions (or thoughts if you will) of the Story Mind. 'A complete story successfully argues all possible sides of its message, thus it will address all the possible human perspectives on that specific issue. That is how the structure and dynamics of a single story create a single Story Mind. This is also why characters are common elements in all stories, along with theme, plot, acts and scenes. Each of these represent the way in which essential human psychology is recreated in stories so that we can view our own thought processes more objectively from the outside looking in' (Phillips and Huntley 1999).

way: as a direct intermediate opponent, or a tempter leading the protagonist astray.¹⁴ The Sceptic regards the solution to the problem with disbelief, thereby hindering its implementation. For some time, Han Solo is such a sceptic who does not believe in the Force. In addition to these key plot roles, the Impact Character forces the protagonist to face their problems. This pressure can come from his own side (e.g., from the guardian) or from the opponents. The plot is predominantly driven by the quartet protagonist/antagonist and guardian/contagonist, while the others are mostly 'fellow passengers'.

Compared to Greimas's model, Dramatica's is more detailed (it includes a total of sixty-four structural subdivisions which I will not discuss here).¹⁵ But more importantly, its eight roles of plot-related problem-solving obviously differ from Greimas's six actantial roles. While the protagonist conforms to Greimas's 'subject', the helper role is split into guardian and sidekick, the opponent role into antagonist, contagonist, and sceptic, and two roles representing rational and emotional action are added. On the other hand, Greimas's 'object' and 'sender' are only implicitly included: as the target state desired by the protagonist and as the factors motivating him. The role of the receiver is missing; apparently, it is regarded as unimportant whether protagonists achieve the goal for themselves or for others.

The reason for these differences is that Greimas's model is based on linguistic syntax and made for interpretation, while the Dramatica model is based on a concept of problem-solving and is geared toward storytelling practice. It aims at dramatisation and demands that each character fulfils a specific function in the development of plot and theme. As it suggests a very specific pattern, it is most useful for examining mainstream plots, but less suitable for other kinds of narratives.

A third model of plot functions has had an even greater influence on film production, especially on some successful Hollywood filmmakers such as George Lucas: Christopher Vogler's concept of the 'writer's journey' (1992). Vogler, a former Disney script developer, refers primarily to the work of mythologist Joseph Campbell on the '*hero's journey*' as a supposedly universal narrative form. In relation to characters, he also draws on C. G. Jung's concept of archetypes as symbols for essential human traits and personality patterns in the collective unconscious (ibid.: 33). In storytelling, such archetypal roles can be used as tools to fulfil certain plot-related and thematic functions. Again, they can be distributed among several characters or be aspects of a single personality (ibid.: 36).

Vogler lists seven essential functional roles (allegedly, 'you can't tell stories without

14 In my opinion, a limitation of the model becomes apparent here. Intuitively, Darth Vader would presumably be categorised as an antagonist, but the schema forces one to see him as a contagonist.

15 The central aspects of bodily action and decision-making are augmented by four additional roles in the areas of the characters' purposes, methodologies, and ways of evaluation. The resulting total of sixty-four structural orientations of the characters can only be combined in certain ways; one character can have all the aspects of various roles except for those that would directly contradict each other, e.g., working toward something/hindering it or logic/emotion. In addition to the characters' objective characteristics, there are subjective perspectives, rules for thematic structures and plot structures, etc. A scientific examination of screenwriting programs such as Dramatica would certainly be interesting.

them'; 1992: 33–94): the Hero ventures into unfamiliar territory to pursue a goal, and thus functions as an identification figure for the audience. He or she faces a powerful antagonist called the Shadow. The Mentor helps the hero by teaching him or her something. The Threshold Guardian blocks the hero from entering the unknown and subjects them to a test. The Herald shows the hero the necessity of the change and intensifies the motivation. The Shapeshifter (such as the good-bad girl in film noir) changes in the course of the story or is misunderstood by the hero, thereby increasing curiosity and suspense. The Trickster lightens the story, misleads the hero, and serves as a catalyst for action. As in Jung's psychoanalytical approach, these archetypal roles can also be regarded as different facets of a single personality, for example, the mentor as the superego, the threshold guardian as inner flaw, or the shadow as repressed destructive desire. Each 'hero's journey' can thus also be interpreted as a process of psychological development.

Again, the model's foundation is different—psychoanalysis and myth theory as opposed to linguistics (Greimas) and mental problem-solving (Dramatica). And again, the models are not congruent. The hero and the adversary are the only positions that Vogler's seven archetypes share with Greimas's six actantial roles and Dramatica's eight roles in problem-solving. There are some further similarities, but they are limited.¹⁶ And in contrast to both Greimas and Dramatica, Vogler adds two roles that have primary functions concerning perspective and affect: the 'trickster' and the 'shapeshifter' are supposed to mislead both the protagonist and audience, thereby enhancing curiosity, suspense, and surprise.

The three models presented here are particularly influential, but there are many other models in theories of screenwriting, literature and drama, with considerably varying numbers and types of plot roles and character functions.¹⁷ This suggests that the models are contingent and their theoretical foundations (be it linguistics, problem-solving, or psychoanalysis) should not be taken too seriously. Therefore, instead of starting from a rigid schema with claims to theoretical superiority and universal applicability, it seems better to take a more modest approach and search for a pragmatic, flexible heuristic of functional roles. To this end, we can first distinguish between roles that fulfil a causal function in the plot and those with other functions. On this basis, we can combine the main causal plot roles that recur in different models with our findings on the structure of motivation (see Chapter 9). The result is similar to Greimas's schema, but more comprehensive, as it integrates as many plot-relevant roles as possible (see Diagram 24, which also correlates the alternative terms of different models). It does

16 Vogler's threshold guardian resembles Dramatica's antagonist, the mentor is a combination of the guardian and the reason role, the herald performs some functions of Greimas's sender, etc.

17 Greimas's actant model is already based on a pattern that Vladimir Propp discovered in Russian folk tales, and in narrative and dramatic theory and screenwriting practice, various further schemata have been developed. For example, Asmuth and Pfister suggest applying Etienne Souriau's schema for dramatic analysis. It also has six positions, but instead of Greimas' 'receiver', there is a 'judge of the situation' that decides how the conflict will be resolved (Asmuth 1997b: 99–100; Pfister 1988: 234–35).

not presuppose that all roles are filled in every narrative, and individual characters do not necessarily have to be assigned to a single role. One character can take on several different roles, and one role can be filled by several characters, or even collectives or forces of nature.

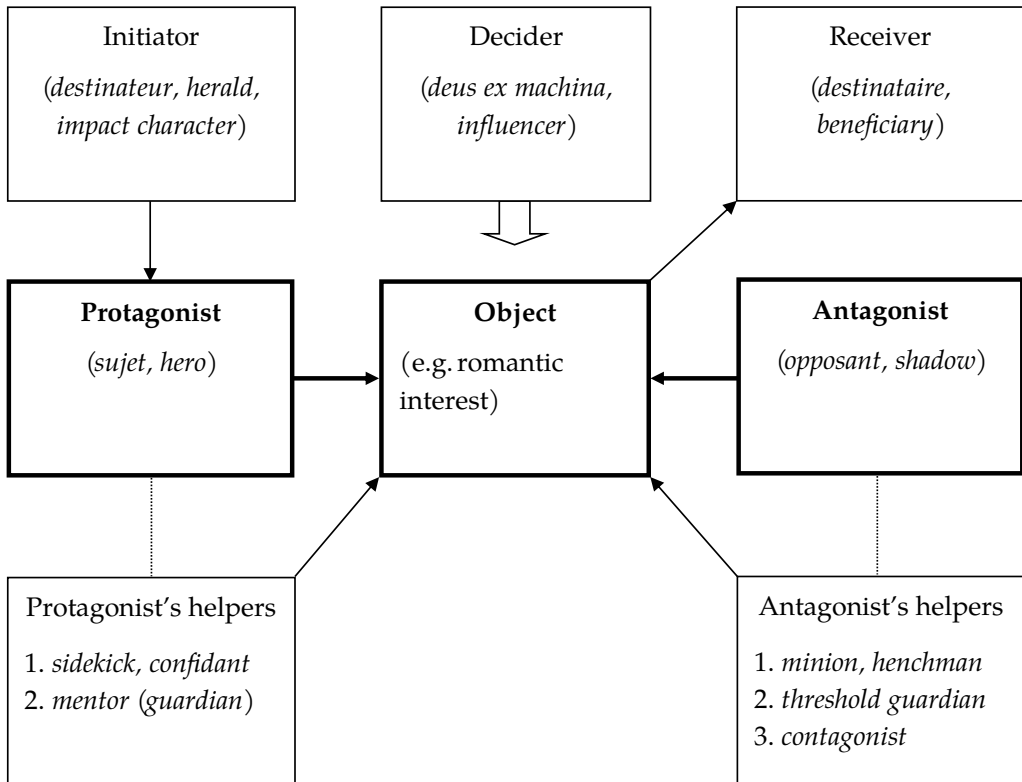


Diagram 24 Plot functions and actant roles within the character constellation

- As any story requires at least one causal agent, the model's core is a *protagonist* (Greimas's *sujet*, Vogler's hero)—possibly collective or abstract—that attempts to reach a goal or bring about a desired state.
- Other characters can be involved in this desired state as *objects* (Greimas's *objet*), such as when the protagonist saves someone or tries to conquer the heart of a romantic partner. Ninety percent of all Hollywood films tell a love story in their plot or sub-plot, in which a character functions as the protagonist's romantic interest (Bordwell 1985a: 157; Frensham 1996: 75). In other cases, the passive object position is occupied by damsels in distress, children in danger, prisoners to be freed, oppressed groups to be empowered, or humankind threatened by natural forces or aliens.
- The protagonist's attempts to reach their goal come up against obstacles, antagonistic forces or, put more simply, the role of the *antagonist* (alternatively:

opposant, shadow). This antagonistic role can be internal, such as the protagonist's flaws, making them into their own antagonist. External obstacles, such as accidents or natural catastrophes, can also play this role. However, in the most common narratives, antagonists appear as opposing characters that fight out the conflicts with the protagonist. Sometimes, a series of increasingly dangerous and powerful opponents fills the antagonist role, similar to the sequence of the miniboss, superboss, and final boss characters in many computer games.

These three roles form the prototypical core of the model, whereby the protagonist role is almost always taken on by characters, the antagonist role mostly, and the object role very often. In most longer narratives, both the protagonists and antagonists are also aided by *helpers* that can appear in a variety of forms:¹⁸

- The protagonist's helpers (*adjuvants*) can be classified primarily in two basic forms: the *mentor* (guardian)—e.g., Obi Wan Kenobi—is in some way (morally, mentally) superior to the protagonist and provides important support, chiefly in the form of advice and protection. The *sidekick*—e.g., R2D2—is inferior, accompanies the protagonist over a long term, and provides aid through loyalty and practical help. (Analogies to prototypical social experiences are obvious here.)
- There are at least three different types of helpers to the central antagonist. The *minion* acts directly on the antagonist's orders. Other characters help the antagonist by acting more independently, often without having a direct alliance with them. The *threshold guardian* raises early obstacles for the protagonist. *Contagonists* hinder the protagonist later on (before the encounter with the main antagonist); they may create additional problems or act as seducers or sceptics that distract the protagonist and tempt them to neglect the crucial goal.

While the helper roles are normally taken on by characters, the following three roles are less frequently occupied in narratives:

- Sometimes the protagonist's actions are not only internally motivated, but there is also an additional external trigger or *initiator* (*destinateur*, herald, impact character). This is often a character that delivers a message to the protagonist or somebody (a client, a superior) that asks them to do something.
- As illustrated in Chapter 9, the protagonist's motives are often altruistic or relate to someone else, a *receiver* (*destinataire*) that is affected by or benefits

¹⁸ Helpers differ from protagonists and antagonists in terms of various criteria: They receive less attention and make a smaller contribution to the achievement or hindering of the goal. Often, their own goal is supremely providing help.

from the protagonist's action. For example, the protagonist might try to reach their goal or gain the target object for others rather than him or herself, such as when saving children for their parents' benefit or pursuing a criminal for the good of society.

- Whether the protagonist achieves the goal or not sometimes depends on a superior instance that influences events, which I have provisionally termed the *decider*. A classic example is the relatively unpopular *deus ex machina*, which saves heroes and provides aid, but is seen as a weak stopgap in storytelling.

In addition to these eight plot roles, characters can also fulfil a number of additional functions, as mentioned above, that few of the models refer to. Characters can intensify the impression of realism, create intertextual and transtextual references, possess an intrinsic aesthetic value, contribute to perspectivisation and emotionalisation, convey important information or higher meanings, and highlight other characters' traits by means of parallels and contrasts. Some of these and additional functions can be found in established classifications. Narrators or commentators are often given the complete function of conveying all the action to the viewers from a higher level. Other characters serve as a means of perspectivisation, a focaliser, or reflector character (see Chapter 13). They perceive the action, react to it, comment on it and assess it. The reason, emotion, sidekick, and sceptic roles from the Dramatica model fit here, being characters that analyse the action logically, respond to it emotionally, and have trust in or doubt the protagonists' solutions to problems. The identification figure performs a more powerful function, suggesting that viewers adopt a mental perspective on the action more strongly.¹⁹ *Confidants* ('confidants' in the seventeenth-century original) convey information in a limited form, as sidekicks that reveal the protagonist's inner life through conversations with them (Platz-Waury 1997a: 591). Other character types contribute to conveying higher meanings, examples being the mouthpiece or *porte-parole* character that verbalises the film's message in dialogue (see Koch 1991: 282 and Chapter 11). The meaning function also occupies the foreground for personification and the allegorical character, though it is usually performed non-linguistically. Some characters serve as spectacular display objects to which an emotionalising function is often linked. The shapeshifter, which generates suspense, curiosity, and surprise, and the trickster, which injects surprise and a comic element, both from Christopher Vogler's model, also serve affective purposes. Of the parallel and contrast characters, the mirror character, which reflects some of the protagonist's traits, stands out (Frensham 1996: 74–75).

Many more character functions can be found, which brings up the question of which functional roles are truly necessary for a narrative. The protagonist role is

19 See Chapter 13. In the field of literature, Harvey uses the term 'reader's delegate' for such characters (1970: 67–68).

the only truly necessary one. Narratives tell a story and have a plot, which requires at least one character that acts with intent. The antagonist could also be an abstract force or force of nature, and the target object, initiator, and receiver can be part of the protagonist's motive. The 'helper' role is facultative, and the protagonist can be left to their own devices. Howard and Mabley's (1996) often repeated basic principle for all stories applies, albeit in a somewhat weaker form: 'Somebody wants something' and 'this something is difficult, but possible to do, get, or achieve'. Accordingly, the smallest possible cast of a film consists of a single protagonist, which is, however, rare. The typical minimum constellation of mainstream narratives comprises 'a protagonist, an opposition and either a mirror or romance' (Frensham 1996: 75). As a rule, films have at least a protagonist and antagonist, plus a helper or romantic interest (e.g., in *Witness*, *Speed*, *Disclosure*, *The Piano*).

10.4 Conflict Constellations: Protagonists and Antagonists

Among all the eight prototypical functional roles that characters can take in the plot (protagonist, antagonist, and their helpers; trigger, target object, the receivers; and the decider role), the roles of protagonist and antagonist are particularly important for the narrative, its conflicts and meanings. This brings up the question of how both roles can be filled and related to each other. The following typology builds on the observations of Kristin Thompson (1999: 45ff.).

For a start, the number of characters that fill the protagonist role can serve as an orientation. Most commonly, a clearly recognisable single protagonist is at the centre of the action and the character constellation. While there are numerous variants of this one-protagonist model, few films have solely a single character. Normally, the protagonist is the focus of interest among several other characters. Single protagonists can also be joined by secondary characters that function as identification or perspectivisation characters. In some films, another character serves as the observer, reflector, or narrator reporting on the protagonist. In *The Shawshank Redemption*, the homodiegetic narrator, long-term prisoner Red (Morgan Freeman), tells the story of the falsely convicted escapee Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins); in *The Great Gatsby*, an observer tells the story of Gatsby's tragic romance. Even superheroes, whose superhuman abilities hinder identification, are occasionally accompanied by more human identification figures (such as Batman and Robin).

Films with *two protagonists* come in at least two general varieties. In films with dual protagonists, the two characters share the same goal and try to achieve it together. Some examples are buddy and odd-couple movies such as *48 Hrs.*, *Thelma and Louise*, films starring Bud Spencer and Terence Hill, *Winnetou*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and other films such as *To Have and Have Not*, in which a couple acts as a team—though generally not as equals (see Tröhler 1995: 23). In crime series, the constellation of a pair of differing protagonists seems to be particularly popular, as is shown by the large

number of productions: *Ein Fall für zwei*, *Starsky & Hutch*, *Cagney & Lacey*, *Remington Steele*, *Miami Vice*, *Kommissar Rex/Inspector Rex*, and many more. The second variety is films with two parallel protagonists who pursue different and often conflicting goals. In many such cases, the characters have some starkly diverging personality traits or are separated spatially. This can involve love stories with conflicting partners (a large number of screwball comedies, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *When Harry Met Sally*), films in which one character wants to become like someone else or in which both protagonists become closer or exchange identities (*Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Hair*), or films with equal opponents, such as the police officer and the master thief in *Heat*. Although the 'parallel' construction is often based on an antagonistic principle, the two characters frequently share or swap the protagonist and antagonist positions because both drive the plot to equal degrees and their motives are equally attractive and multidimensional.

Films with *several individual protagonists* are also quite frequent.²⁰ The number of protagonists can range from *The Three Musketeers* and *Three Men and a Baby* to *The Magnificent Seven* and the twenty-four protagonists in Robert Altman's *Nashville*. However, in very few cases do all characters truly carry the plot equally. Thompson classifies multi-protagonist films according to the degree the individual protagonists' storylines intersect and influence each other. At one end of the spectrum, the multiple protagonists pursue a common goal (like dual protagonists). For example, in disaster films such as *The Poseidon Adventure*, several more or less equally important characters need to escape a danger. On the other end of the multi-protagonist spectrum are films such as the country music mosaic *Nashville*, in which the characters' storylines develop independently and are connected only by relevant situations, places, or themes in which more than one of them appears. In the middle of the spectrum are films such as *Short Cuts* and *Magnolia*, in which the characters' storylines all have separate resolutions, though they intersect and influence each other. The storylines can be said to spread in opposite directions from a centre point like the ribs of an umbrella, covering a common theme together.

Since Thompson concentrates on Hollywood cinema, she does not mention two other possibilities that are more often found in European or Asian cinema. One is the case of *protagonist collectives*, large groups that pursue the same goal together without individual members being singled out and individualised, as in *Bronenosiec Potjomkin/Battleship Potemkin* and other works by Eisenstein. If single characters are highlighted in such films, they serve only as typified exemplars also representing the others in the group. Margrit Tröhler terms such collectives 'group characters' and contrasts them with the 'character groups' of individualised multiple protagonists in Hollywood disaster films (1995: 25ff.). Finally, films can also have only *rudimentary protagonists*. Rather than an active main character that shapes the story, a passive or purely reactive main character can, for example, be presented as an object for analysis,

20 Thompson speaks of multiple-protagonist films (1999: 47–48); see also Hickethier 2001a: 129; Tröhler 1995.

as in *Der Totmacher/Deathmaker* (further analysed below). Or, as in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad/Last Year at Marienbad*, a protagonist's motive which initially seems to drive the plot forward, can dissolve or lose its narrative sense due to contradictory information.²¹

Thus, there are character constellations with rudimentary, single, dual, and parallel protagonists, multiple protagonists whose stories coincide to a greater or lesser degree, and collectives in the protagonist role. They all can face a similarly wide variety of antagonists. Most commonly, the conflict is between individuals, but in contrast to the protagonists, another possibility is that there are not any characters in the antagonist role. With an inner conflict, the protagonist is their own opponent; other characters struggle against abstract principles or forces of nature, as in *Twister*. The mise-en-scene can also make human antagonists appear to be abstract, dark forces, such as the truck driver in Steven Spielberg's *Duel*. Fairly often, a single protagonist faces several antagonists simultaneously (e.g., in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), a disadvantageous situation. Occasionally, a single, but extremely powerful antagonist faces a group of protagonists (*Alien*). Accomplices can increase the opponents' power. Collectives can also function as the antagonist, as in Eisenstein's films (for example, the bourgeoisie and their henchmen, or the soldiers and spies in *Stachka/Strike*).

Various alternatives are possible in the constellation of the main characters beyond the opposition of protagonists and antagonists. Occasionally, other characters can become more important than the protagonist and receive more attention, as in *Gilda*. This is also the case in films that could be termed 'reconstructive personality studies'. In *Citizen Kane*, the reporter researching Kane's life does not represent the film's focus, Kane (Orson Welles) himself does. *The Killers* revolves around the character of the murder victim, 'Swede' (Burt Lancaster), rather than the insurance investigator who wants to get to the bottom of the man's secret. In both films, two stories are intertwined: the tragic biography of an unusual main character (Kane or 'Swede') told in flashbacks, and the story of its reconstruction by a less conspicuous protagonist whose actions resemble those of a detective. An even more pronounced example is Romuald Karmakar's psychological portrait *Der Totmacher/Deathmaker*. The main character is the murderer, Haarmann (Götz George), rather than the bureaucrat who drives the minimalistic plot of the interrogation as a rudimentary protagonist. Since the backstory plot is also reduced to a minimum and conveyed through dialogue alone, Haarmann, who only reacts and does not have an apparent goal, cannot be regarded as the protagonist.

21 However, in both cases one could advance a candidate for the protagonist role: in *Der Totmacher*, the prison psychologist who questions the mass murderer; in *Marienbad*, the narrator whose flow of speech can be understood as an attempt at persuasion and whose unspecified actions can be seen as taking place in a triangular constellation. However, both characters are far from what is normally understood as a protagonist. For more on *L'Année dernière à Marienbad/Last Year at Marienbad*, see Koebner 1998a.

Nevertheless, the most common structure still is the conflict of a single protagonist with one or more antagonists. The following rule tends to apply: the more protagonists, the less common the character constellation. Buddy movies with two heroes pursuing the same objective are still fairly common. Less common are ensemble films with several equally important characters. True exceptions are films that foreground collectives, rather than single characters, as Eisenstein's works. The number of more complex constellations seems to have increased in the past years, chiefly because of four causes: the growing amount of media knowledge possessed by wide viewer groups; the marketing strategies of event movies, which aim at several different audiences; the possibility of multiple viewings (DVD, VOD); and the spread of alternative narrative modes in other media (television series, computer games, Internet content; see Eder 2002a; Leschke and Venus 2007).

Nevertheless, it should be expected that simple conflict constellations—one protagonist, one antagonist, a few helpers and a limited number of other roles—still predominate in conventional feature films. Mainstream cinema tends to personalise conflicts, since the conflict constellation affects plot structure, dramatisation, and narrative economy in several ways. The more protagonists and storylines there are, the less time can be devoted to each of them and the more difficult it is to tell the story in an easily understandable manner, involve viewers with the protagonists and have them generate intense feelings for them. Thus, the tendency towards personalisation and limiting the size and number of the constellations is not a historically contingent development but is based on general principles of entertainment that ensure easy comprehensibility and intensify affective involvement within a limited amount of time. Moreover, simple personalised conflict constellations are easier to remember, they influence viewer expectations as elements of media dispositions, and facilitate swift orientation. The functional roles of protagonist, antagonist, and their helpers are familiar and linked with other typical traits. The development of their interactions can be roughly anticipated, and viewers feel confirmed in their ability to orient themselves and in their media competence, while sufficient room remains for variations that prevent boredom.

10.5 Interactions, Relationships, and Values: The Character Constellation as a Social System

Examining the orchestration of stable traits and plot functions within the constellation of characters only makes it possible to grasp the most general structures of their interpersonal network. However, their social interactions and relationships are much more varied, subtle and dynamic and require closer scrutiny, also because they are linked to significant meanings and values and influence the viewers' interpretation and affective involvement in many ways (see Chapter 11 and Part VII). Previous chapters have already introduced some basic categories concerning the sociology of

characters (Chapter 6) and their social motivation and interaction (Chapter 9). In the following, this is briefly complemented by further distinctions that can be relevant for the analysis and interpretation of characters (partly following Doležel 1998: 96–110).

First, three crucial, interrelated aspects of social interaction can be distinguished: bodily movement, perception, and communication. In the field of *physical behaviour*, the body movements of the characters relate to each other in terms of causality, action and reaction, simultaneity or non-simultaneity, harmony or disharmony. For example, the movements of dancers are rhythmically related to each other, and fights, romantic scenes and excited discussions are also staged, choreographed and performed in a certain way. So, the question is how the specific spatio-temporal performance and entanglement of characters' body movements can be described.

In terms of *perceptual behaviour*, the characters respond to each other by looking towards or away from each other, listening or covering their ears, staring or averting their glances, thereby orienting themselves in relation to potential interaction partners. The example of Rick's alternately controlling, absent and tense glances has already been described (Chapter 6). Perception can be involuntary and casual, but it can also take the form of active and deliberate observation. Especially in film, an increase in exchanged glances often indicates an intensification of the relationship (of love or hate) or announces an imminent physical interaction. So, the general question is who perceives whom, how often, and in what way.

Characters *communicate* their mental experiences through various semiotic actions such as speech, nonverbal behaviour (including body movement and active looking), silence (communicative omission), and various media. A look—or the avoidance of a look—can say more than a thousand words. Communication can be symmetrical or asymmetrical, such as when someone never lets the other person get a word in edgewise. The narrative world can be permanently changed by communication, for example in the form of performative speech acts: you are now married. So, the question in this area is who communicates with whom and in what manner.

Whether in the form of communication, perception, or (other) body movements, social behaviour is motivated in some way, and the agents relate to each other based on *social motives* (see Chapter 9). In the same way as action in general, social interaction can be more or less rational, impulsive, akratic, or irrational. These various forms of behaviour can be unevenly distributed within the character constellation, such as when the protagonist is for the most part rational and acts logically, while the antagonist is impulsive or irrational (like the FBI agent and the psychopathic serial killer in *The Silence of the Lambs*).

Social interaction and interpersonal relationships differ from other forms of behaviour in some specific ways. As a rule, they are based on opinions of and emotional attitudes toward others. This knowledge and feeling directed at others can be perspectivised and conveyed by film in different ways. Moreover, it is shaped by collective representations (Doležel 1998: 105ff.; van Dijk 2008), shared cognitive systems such as languages, cultural archetypes, religions, science, and ideologies,

and also through collective 'structures of feeling' (Williams 2001: 64) and emotional cultures, including general rules for situationally appropriate or 'normal' emotions and their expressions (e.g., year of mourning, ideals of beauty, patriotism).

Such cognitive and affective systems depend on the interaction of *social groups*—large and small groups (families, nations), in-groups and out-groups (we/the others)—and the assignment of characters to such groups, which permit varying amounts of personal freedom. Films can embed their characters in very different social systems, from realistic to fantastic, from pluralistic to restrictive societies. The individual character can behave in different ways in the context of these social systems: dogmatically, opportunistically, as conformists, critically, or independently. Another characteristic of social interactions is that the probability of coincidences, mistakes, and misunderstandings increases as the number of participants rises, which can lead to unintended results. Viewers take such circumstances into account when judging a character's behaviour.

The characters' interactions and relationships are essentially determined by their *hierarchies of power* and the degree to which they can influence the behaviour of others through physical, mental, or social means, such as persuasion, physical compulsion, manipulation, temptation, or social sanctions. One convention of mainstream film is that the protagonists change under such influences, mostly in that they grow, overcome their key flaw, and satisfy their inner need (see Chapter 9). As a rule, such changes are affected through other characters, such as mentors or romantic partners. This is how the egocentric reporter in *Bruce Almighty* recognises the meaning of love and selflessness with the help of God and his girlfriend. In this regard, the question is therefore how much power is possessed by which characters in the constellation, and who influences whom and how.

The characters' interactions and relationships move between opposing poles: affinity and rejection, harmony and disharmony, support and conflict, amity and antipathy, love and hate, admiration and contempt, attraction and aggression. These orientations can be combined or overlap (love-hate; attraction in one sense, disgust in another). They can manifest themselves directly, through action, or be subliminal. By examining the characters' verbal and nonverbal communication, viewers can discover both manifest current conflicts and latent or future ones. Based on this, they can draw conclusions about the characters' further relationships and perceptions of each other.²² Superheroes such as Wonder Woman and Black Panther, as well as more ordinary heroes like Rick Blaine, usually enjoy a great deal of other characters' esteem, they are admired, desired, and respected, even by their opponents. The opposite is true for underdogs. If there is a high level of respect distributed relatively equally among the characters, a conflict is less probable; a low degree of recognition distributed unevenly points to confrontational situations. Classic dramas show a more uneven distribution

22 For this, Pfister uses the term 'elective entropy', which can be determined by means of sociometric methods (1988: 233).

of esteem and greater fluctuations for individual characters than real group situations do (Pfister 1988: 233). That dramas are more dramatic than everyday life is not particularly surprising, and this is probably even more true for mainstream movies.

Of particular importance in this context are conflictual and erotic relationships between characters (see Chapter 9). Both attract special attention not only for evolutionary and sociocultural reasons (Schwender 2001), but also because of their complexity, variety and their suitability for interesting and eventful stories (Doležel 1998: 110). Conflicts in general can be external or internal, individual or structural, constructive or destructive, and differ in terms of the people involved, their objects and the means used. They can take the form of fights, debates, games or feuds and go through certain phases: outbreak, climax and resolution through victory or defeat, surrender or compromise. In the realm of Eros, all levels of motivation and conflict are involved, including the sexual drive, complex forms of love, power relations, social norms and individual strategies. The question here is what specific kinds of erotic relationships and conflicts develop between characters.

The characters' traits, interactions and relationships are subject to constant evaluation by other characters, narrators, filmmakers and—on this basis—the audience. The distribution of traits among the characters as well as evaluative forms of representation, dialogue, narrator comments, text inserts, visual metaphors, etc., serve to categorise the characters according to a (bioculturally based and socially shaped) *value structure*. Central to this is the 'moral structure' of the film (Smith 1995: Chapter 6), but other values such as beauty, power, intelligence etc. are also important. For example, not only Captain Renault praises Ilsa Lund's outstanding beauty in *Casablanca*, but the film's entire mise-en-scene revolves around it: elegant costumes, centred and harmonious framing, camera perspective, shot duration, close-ups, soft focus, and glamour lighting. Even if viewers do not agree with the judgements suggested by the film, the nature of the judgement and the impression the character is supposed to make are usually clear to them thanks to their social and media knowledge.²³ This becomes obvious when a gap opens between the values of filmmakers, characters or narrators on the one hand, and the viewers on the other. When contemporary viewers see a hate film like *Jud Süß*, most of them recognise the antisemitic position without sharing it.

The fact that the moral structure of the character constellation can be overlaid by other value structures, for example the relative distribution of traits, such as attractiveness, intelligence, power or vitality, raises difficult questions for film or narrative theories that have so far focused (almost) exclusively on morality. It is likely that this also has implications for affective involvement with characters, which will be discussed later in more detail (see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14). Existing differentiations for the analysis of narrative moral structures, for example by Murray Smith (1995), can, however, be generalised and transferred to other fields of values with some adaptations and additions. On this basis, the distribution of values among characters can be analysed regarding its spectrum, graduation, ambiguousness, and centredness:

23 Murray Smith speaks of co-text as a set of values and opinions that represent the backdrop of events (1995: 194); however, this can be understood more precisely as an interaction of various judging instances and the viewers' social and media dispositions.

- **Spectrum:** the characters' traits and behaviours can range across a broader or narrower spectrum of values. For example, in a film noir, both protagonists and antagonists may be brutal and corrupt (narrow value spectrum), while in a superhero movie the glorious heroes clash with evil villains (broad value spectrum). Moreover, different works and genres can cover different segments of the value spectrum. For example, if all the characters in a melodrama have the best intentions, their constellation covers an equally narrow but more positive part of the value spectrum than film noir. Or in a soap opera, all the main characters may be conventionally attractive, while in a satirical comedy, all the characters may appear ugly by prevalent standards.
- **Graduation:** the value structure can be polarised or graduated.²⁴ A polarised structure amounts to a black-and-white portrayal. Certain characters, usually the protagonists and their allies, are attributed exclusively positive traits and actions, while the other, antagonistic characters are all meant to be seen as negative. In a graduated structure, characters have both positive and negative traits, which is often considered to be 'more realistic'.
- **Centredness:** in a centred structure, a single character—often the protagonist or their mentor—is clearly given the most positive value of all, while in decentral structures the positive and negative values are spread around more evenly among several characters.²⁵
- **(Un-)Ambiguousness:** the value structure can be more or less definite, depending on how clearly the value status of the individual characters can be determined. An unambiguous evaluation of characters can be obstructed in various ways, for example by conveying incomplete information about them or by presenting their behaviour in an ambivalent or contradictory way.

The value structure of most mainstream movies is unambiguous and centred, covers a broad spectrum, and is graduated to a medium degree. This means that most main characters have both good and bad traits, but their shares of these traits are so unequal that there are clearly recognisable centres of morals, attractiveness, strength, and other values. This makes it easier for viewers to orient themselves and bond with characters. In addition, the broad spectrum between 'very good' and 'very bad' increases the potential for conflicts between the characters.

²⁴ Smith uses the terms Manichean and graduated moral structure (1995: Chapter 6).

²⁵ Unambiguousness and centredness approximately correspond to Smith's narrower concepts of moral resolution and moral centre (1995: 213).

When examined somewhat more closely, three basic structures of values (and of perspective and involvement; see Chapters 13 and 14) are common in different kinds of films. (1) Some films have an extremely exaggerated and particularly clear-cut distribution of values. This includes, for example, many horror films, crime thrillers, action and superhero films, as well as war and propaganda films intended to convey political messages. (2) Other productions work with a flexibly centred value structure in order to provide opportunities for identification for different audiences. Viewers can choose among a limited number of characters, to pick out the ones that conform to their values to the greatest extent. This is particularly obvious in constellations with protagonist duos, such as partners or lovers. For example, the television police series *Cagney & Lacey* provides its audience an opportunity to regard either the career-oriented single woman Christine Cagney (Sharon Gless) or the working mother Mary Beth Lacey (Tyne Daley) as a value centre; the one conforming to a more modern and the other to a more traditional perception of women, so that the structure's flexibility appeals to a larger possible audience (see Fiske 1997: Chapter 9; Seger 1990: 104–106). (3) Much rarer are unambiguous decentral structures based on a pluralism of values, such as in the Oscar winner *Crash*. They present several equal characters that are portrayed in a similarly positive way but have very different traits. In such a manner, viewers are challenged to actively consider and weigh different values and perspectives, rather than having to choose a side.

10.6 Overview: Typical Character Constellations in Different Kinds of Films

The previous considerations show that character constellations involve a complex system of interrelations on many layers:

1. Characters are arranged in a hierarchy of attention as main, secondary, and minor characters. How much attention a character attracts depends not only on the extent of its presentation in the film, but on many different factors, including the following.
2. Characters perform a variety of narrative functions. These include typical roles of action in plots and conflict constellations, above all protagonist, antagonist, and their helpers. Moreover, characters function as narrators, conveyors of information, instances of perspectivisation, carriers of meaning, display objects, emotional triggers, and parallel or contrasting elements in the following respects:
3. As artefacts, the characters in a constellation may be similar or different in terms of their audiovisual presentation (acting style, costumes, lighting, camerawork etc.), in how information is conveyed about them, and in more general artefact qualities, such as their degree of realism, typification, or complexity.

4. As represented beings, characters differ in terms of their corporeal, psychological, and social features, such as their external appearance, bodily abilities, personality traits, motives, group memberships, social roles, and status. The distribution of characters' properties (as artefacts and represented beings) across a constellation produces characteristic patterns, analogies and contrasts, which group, isolate, or foreground individual characters within the constellation.
5. Characters' social interactions and relationships between the poles of attraction and rejection, amity and antipathy are particularly significant. Based on social motives, structured by social systems, and linked with power and esteem, they manifest themselves above all in the form of physical action, perception, and communication.
6. Many traits and relationships of characters are linked with values attributed to them by other characters, narrators, filmmakers, viewers, or discourses. This positions characters within a value structure. The distribution of moral, aesthetic, and other values across characters creates a structure with a certain spectrum, centredness, gradation, and (un)ambiguousness of values. This also influences the viewers' evaluative and affective reactions decisively.

The following three additional levels of the character constellation are based on the preceding ones, and will be dealt with in more detail in Chapters 11 to 13:

1. Usually, the characters in the constellation are positioned in a *structure of indirect or higher-level meanings*. For example, they can relate to each other as thematic instances or symbols: the one character stands for a virtue, another for its complementary vice (Chapter 11). Furthermore, characters can be linked to each other through their references to pre-filmic reality: a character may possess autobiographical features or be based on a filmmaker's romantic partner or enemy (Chapter 12). Thus, characters fit into structures of symbolic and symptomatic meaning.
2. Characters' perspectives of storyworld situations—their perceptions, thoughts, wishes, evaluations, and feelings—are conveyed to viewers in various ways and to differing degrees (Chapter 13). The spectrum ranges from extensive perspective assimilation (identification) to eliminating the perspectives of certain characters. This *perspective structure*²⁶ can be concentrated on a single character (monoperspective) or distributed among several (polyerspective). It is an essential foundation for producing imaginative proximity to or distance from the characters.

26 I have adopted the term from Pfister (1988: Section 3.5), but my usage departs from his definition (see Chapter 13).

3. Closely related to perspective, proximity, and assessment is the *structure of affective engagement* with the characters of a constellation. This spectrum ranges from intensive sympathy and empathy to antipathy or a lack of feeling, in other words, from positive or congruent feelings to negative, dissonant feelings or their complete absence (Chapter 14).

While these nine structural levels influence each other, they develop their own internal dynamics. On each level, the network of relationships tends to foreground certain characters; often, but not necessarily the same ones. One of them might stand out because of their physical, psychological, or social features, while another is conspicuous because of the manner of representation. A third possesses a combination of particularly important functions, and the perspective of a fourth is dominant. The overall effect of the character constellation and its scenic configurations are products not of a single level, but the interaction of all levels. This can be compared to different layers of colour producing an image on film. Since characters as well as their relationships change, this is a moving image. One character can receive more attention than another, and at times one function, similarity, or contrast can stand out more than another.

An extreme example of this is Angela Schanelec's *Marseille*, which is divided into three parts, each with largely separate constellations of characters. In the first part, the young photographer Sophie visits Marseille for a few weeks, she explores the city, and engages in a tender but fleeting love affair with the car mechanic, Pierre. In the second part, Sophie is back in Berlin and drifts into the background of the narrative, which now focuses on a couple she befriends, for whom she babysits. Hanna seems agitated and irritable, her boyfriend Ivan cool and disinterested. They both seem estranged from each other. Hanna accuses Sophie of being in love with Ivan. Sophie denies it, but the film suggests that Hanna is right, among other things by presenting Sophie and Ivan as parallel characters with many common personality traits: they are both introverted, perfectionists, emotionally stable photographers and thus contrast with Hanna as an extroverted, chaotic, neurotic actress. Sophie decides to get out of this situation and go back to Marseille. In the third part of the film, she is interrogated by the French police because, shortly after her arrival, she was forced by a fleeing robber to change clothes with him. Sophie cries in shock, but has apparently detached herself from Berlin after the cathartic event and goes for a walk on the city beach. These three constellations of characters are spatially and narratively separated from each other, and they foreground different main characters, core relationships and manifest conflicts. On closer inspection, however, they are connected by Sophie's latent inner conflict: through her new experiences in the foreign city, she manages to break away from her unacknowledged love for Ivan, while he and Hanna seem to remain in their unhappy relationship for the time being. The film is unconventional in many ways, including its slow pace, narrative openness and special closeness to the perspective of a female main character. (However, one could also note that all the characters

are white middle-class Europeans and people of colour only appear in the form of aggressive teenagers in the background of some shots. All the main characters come from creative milieus, and the film suggests that love presupposes similarity, which rules out the possibility that the worker Pierre and the actress Hanna could match Sophie or Ivan.)

In contrast to arthouse films like *Marseille*, characters of more conventional films frequently occupy typical bundles of positions within the above-mentioned nine structural levels of constellations. Table 9 provides an overview of such typical positions in most mainstream genres (especially crime, thriller, horror, action, fantasy, Western, and sci-fi, while many dramas, romcoms or musicals partly deviate from the pattern). Protagonists normally receive a great deal of attention; their representations are extensive and they should seem individualised, multidimensional, realistic, and complex. Their traits—at the film's ending at least and with the exception of underdogs, anti-heroes or man-in-the-street heroes—are positive overall. They are attractive, strong, intelligent, and humorous; have complex relationships; pursue altruistic goals; and earn a high degree of social recognition (at least from those whose opinion matters). In all, they represent the positive value pole of the constellation, or they come close to it (if it is occupied by another, even more positive character, such as a mentor). They often stand for significant meanings and major themes of the entire film. Viewers are invited to approach their perspective, feel close to them, and sympathise and empathise with them.

Typical opposite poles of the protagonists are antagonists and antagonistic secondary characters (accomplices). Both are characterised by stereotyping, negative traits, and harmful, hostile, or egotistical actions. At the same time, the antagonists are often strong, intelligent, and powerful, which makes them dangerous, while the evil secondary characters—e.g., 'greasers' in old Westerns—are for the most part weak, stupid, and not really dangerous. Viewers do not learn much about these characters' perspectives, and imaginative distance is maintained. The antagonist is intended to trigger intensely negative feelings such as hatred, anger, fear, or disgust, while the secondary characters can be perceived as equally negative, but without evoking strong affective responses, including contempt.

Some other typical secondary characters are generally viewed positively, especially in a moral sense, though they tend to be physically, psychologically, or socially weaker or less interesting compared to protagonists and antagonists. This includes, in particular, the friendly though subordinate protagonist's helper and the powerless and passive objects of the action. They are normally typified, their perspectives are at most briefly hinted at, and they are intended to evoke feelings of condescending sympathy, such as pity or amusement.

Relations	Positive position	Counterpole 1	Counterpole 2
<i>Plot function</i>	protagonist	antagonist	antagonists' helper
<i>Attention</i>	main character	main character	secondary character
<i>Artefact qualities</i>	individualised, multidimensional, relatively realistic, focus of narrative and audiovisual presentation (e.g., camera, editing)	(stereo-)typified, less dimensional, less realistic, relatively detailed representation	(stereo-)typified, one-dimensional, less realistic, representation limited to few cues of negative affect
<i>Physical traits</i>	strong, beautiful, skilful...	strong, unattractive, skilful...	weak, unattractive, clumsy...
<i>Mental traits</i>	good intentions, clever, controlled, humorous...	bad intentions, unrestrained, clever, dark humour...	bad intentions, stupid, ruthless, humourless...
<i>Social traits</i>	middle class, widespread values/norms, many complex social roles and relationships, status growth	upper or lower class, values not very widespread, high status, few roles and relationships shown	socially marginal group, few widespread values, low status, few roles and relationships shown
<i>Interactions and relationships</i>	altruism, social contribution, 'giving', arc from weaknesses to position of strength	egoism, social damage, 'taking', arc from position of power to position of weakness	egoism, social damage, 'taking', position of relative weakness, only situational strength
<i>Evaluation</i>	positive, centre of moral and other values	negative, opposite pole of moral values	negative, opposite pole of moral and other values
<i>Symbolism/ symptomatology</i>	central carrier of meaning for / reference to something positive	carrier of meaning for / reference to something negative	less relevant contribution to meaning
<i>Perspective taking</i>	perspective assimilation, closeness, identification	perspective rarely conveyed, rare situational closeness, general distance	Perspective not conveyed, distance
<i>Affective stance</i>	positive, congruent feelings	negative, dissonant feelings	negative, dissonant feelings

Table 9 Typical positions of protagonists, antagonists, and antagonists' helpers within the character constellation

Of course, there are many exceptions to this pattern. But one reason these typical and statistically dominant clusters of structural positions are important is that they are normally occupied by members of certain social groups. Numerous works point out how widespread social stereotyping is in film, and this can have serious consequences for the groups involved.²⁷ The logic behind stereotyping social groups is general, effective and usually commercial: in order to increase the target audience's levels of identification, emotion, and entertainment, its in-groups are placed in the foreground and represented as being more positive than they truly are, while out-groups are disparaged or villainised. The out-groups involved are, for the most part, unattractive as target audiences, for instance because they have less disposable income, are involved in conflicts with the primary target audience, exercise less social influence, and have less access to the means of production. The majority generally already has stereotypical mental conceptions about them that have become naturalised over time.

To describe widespread influences of intergroup relations on typical character constellations, Berg draws on Bowen's theory of family systems (2002: 56–65). This theory organises networks of relationships into a varying number of triangles, in the case of a family, for instance, father, mother, and son; mother, son, and daughter; etc. The two more powerful members of the triangle join forces and exclude the third by declaring them to be inadequate and turning them into a scapegoat. Berg applies this to society and mainstream film: in a conflict constellation, idealised protagonists from a socially dominant group, such as white US males, are juxtaposed with stereotyped antagonists that belong to an out-group, such as Arabs, while minor characters belonging to various other groups support one side or the other. Such films may suggest that viewers who are not white US males identify with the 'positive' minor characters and take sides with the dominant group against the antagonists so as not to belong to the 'bad guys', who are stigmatised by the film.

In the history of US or European film and television production—above all, in genres such as crime films, Westerns, science fiction, adventure, action, and war films—the following constellation actually is especially common: the hero protagonists are white Anglo-American or European heterosexual males, twenty to fifty years old, members of the middle class, able-bodied, and conventionally attractive. On the other hand, women, homosexuals, members of ethnic and religious minorities, the elderly, and the disabled are represented less often, in a more negative light, and more stereotypically. An above-average number of antagonists and their helpers represent members of social groups that are considered problematic or hostile in that society and time—for example, Russians and Arabs in Hollywood cinema. Most antagonists are members of groups whose interests (presumably) conflict with those of the target audience in real life. Both the protagonists' helpers and the passive objects of the action, on the other hand, often belong to weaker groups within their own society that currently

27 See, for example, Berg 2002; Bogle 2004; Hall 2004; Benshoff and Griffin 2004; and more recently Brylla 2023.

do not pose a threat to the dominant interests. Subordinate, cooperative social roles are usually assigned to them, as their assimilation or integration into the hegemonic system is desired. In the history of Hollywood cinema, these roles have often been played by women (as objects) and African Americans (as helpers).

In other regions and modes of film production, the roles are cast differently: the protagonists are Chinese in Chinese cinema, Indians in Bollywood cinema, Black people in Nollywood and Blaxploitation films, women in feminist films, LGBTQIA+ in queer cinema, outsiders in cult films, intellectuals in art cinema and teenagers in films for young people. Some of these film forms are conscious attempts to tell the own stories of underrepresented groups, others are aimed at local audiences or aim to exploit niche markets commercially. Nevertheless, the Western mainstream is still dominant worldwide and should receive special critical attention because of its massive influence. It influences the attitudes of billions of viewers towards social groups and shapes their images of themselves and others, their social fears and fantasies.

Therefore, the cultural and critical analysis of the character constellations of individual works should firstly consider their relationship to the actual social structure of the society portrayed, secondly their relationship to certain (target) audience groups and thirdly their relationship to the locally available overall range of films. Of relevance here are, for example, the following questions: to what extent does the constellation of characters correspond to actual or desirable relations in the depicted segment of society (for example, regarding the proportion of genders, classes, or ethnic groups in a social sphere)? Which audience groups is the film aimed at and which does it reach, are they dominant or disadvantaged groups? How many films in the available overall offer have similar or different constellations, does the film correspond to a hegemonic standard or does it provide an alternative? Analysing character constellations is therefore particularly relevant for critical examining film production and its societal contexts. Since this book is about developing a general foundation for a theory of characters, I cannot elaborate on these important questions here, but only refer to the approaches that have already dealt with them in a more differentiated way, especially stereotype and racism studies, queer and gender studies, feminist film theory, cultural studies, or works on postcolonialism.²⁸

10.7 An Example: The Character Constellation in *Casablanca*

In accordance with the more general objective of this book, the essentials of the interaction between the character constellation's various structural levels will now be briefly illustrated, using *Casablanca* as an example. A simplified structure of the constellation is visualised in Diagram 25.²⁹

28 Benschhoff and Griffin 2004 provides a good introduction to the ideology of Hollywood cinema through numerous citations from the literature. One of the most comprehensive and nuanced new approaches to film and stereotyping (albeit in documentary) is Brylla 2023.

29 The diagram is based on the exchange with students in several seminars, to whom I am grateful.

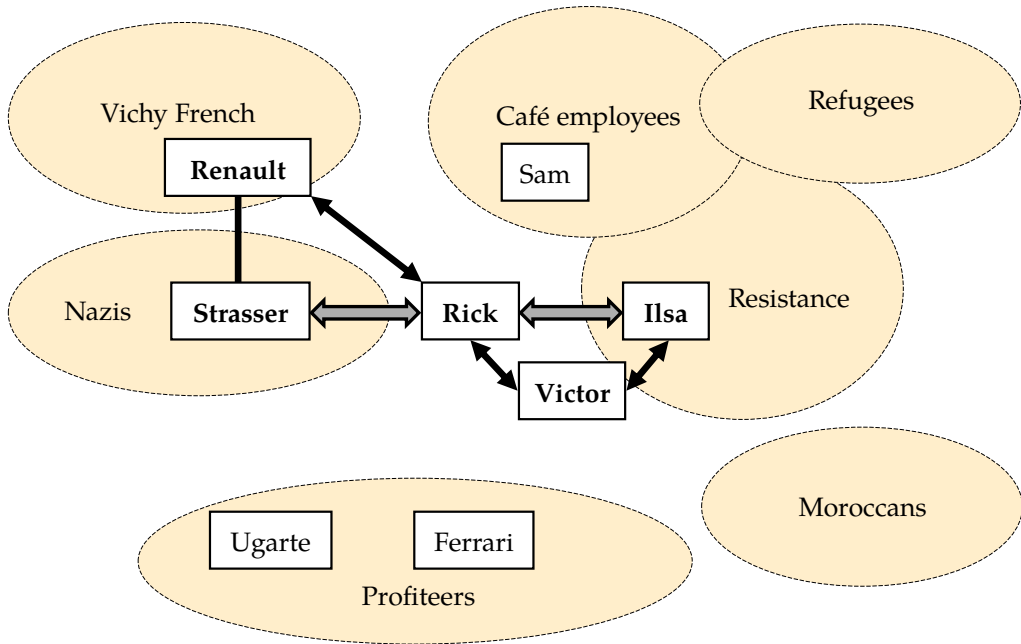


Diagram 25 The character constellation of *Casablanca* with a selection of the most important characters and relationships (boxes: major characters; ovals: social groupings; double arrows: conflicts/antagonism; simple lines: support)

Rick Blaine is the focus of *attention* for most of the time, and Ilsa enters the foreground in just a few sequences. The three other main characters, Captain Renault, Major Strasser, and Laszlo, have a significantly smaller presence. There are three relevant secondary characters: Sam, Ugarte, and Ferrari. The less important speaking roles that are still memorable (but not included in the diagram) are the waiter Karl, Yvonne, the bartender, the pickpocket, and the Bulgarian couple. The many other characters receive little attention. Thus, the constellation is large, though it focuses on just a few central characters that appear in changing configurations of two, three, and four, with Rick dominating the scene. The main characters and central secondary characters relate to each other as elements of a complex, characteristic structure of narrative functions within three linked main plot lines. Firstly, there is the romance plot: Rick wants something from Ilsa—to force her to make a declaration or to win her back; Ilsa, on the other hand, does not want to cheat on her husband. This main plot line determines the development of the escape plot: Ilsa and Victor Laszlo want to escape with the aid of the letters of transit; Rick prevents this at first, then enables their escape with his plan, which Renault and Strasser attempt to obstruct. This outer action is linked with an inner one, the integrity plot: Rick must restore his moral identity and integrity and overcome his inner flaw. In all three plots, Rick appears to be an indecisive, even passive protagonist for a long time and does not develop a clear outer goal until the final phase of the plot. He then decides not to get back together with Ilsa, enables

her and Laszlo to escape, and in doing so, restores his integrity. Before that happens, Rick's actions consist chiefly in deliberate omission, in that he refuses to give them the letters of transit. He himself does not seem to know the reason for holding Ilsa back. Does he want revenge, to force her to declare her love, to reconcile with her, or to convince her to return to him?

The lack of clarity about the protagonist's motives and the change in his goals make it more difficult than usual to assign the other plot functions. In the final part of the escape plot, Renault and Strasser function as antagonists because they try to hinder Rick's escape plan and stop Laszlo. Throughout the development before that and within the love and integrity plots, Rick has at least three other opponents: Laszlo as a rival, Ilsa as a loyal wife who wants the letters of transit from him, and above all, him himself. The antagonist role changes in the film's final phase, from Ilsa, Laszlo, and Rick himself to Strasser and Renault, who now turn from merely latent to manifest antagonism. At the same time, the characters perform other functions. Ilsa and Rick are the most important carriers of meaning and elicitors of affect. However, Ilsa changes from an active antagonist to a passive display object and the recipient of an action in that she is saved by Rick both physically and morally. Laszlo, on the other hand, is not only an antagonist but at the same time a mentor who sets a moral standard for Rick. Later, he becomes an object/receiver that is saved by his former rival. In the plot role of an initiator, Ugarte sets events in motion by giving Rick the letters of transit. With his music, Sam performs an emotionalising function and serves both as a sidekick and confidant with whom Rick talks about Ilsa and as a sceptic who tries to protect him from her. Strasser is an object of hatred, a shadow. The altogether most complex bundle of functions is taken by Captain Renault. At the film's beginning, he serves as an informant about Rick's past and psyche, and later as a *porte-parole* character that openly thematises Rick's conflict, love vs virtue. At the film's end, he is (temporarily) an antagonist, creates suspense as a shapeshifter (is he helping Rick or the Nazis?), provides comic relief as a trickster ('Round up the usual suspects'), and serves as a helper and decider for Rick's escape plan and contributes to a bittersweet ending.

Beyond these basic structures, the network of the characters' relationships is so complex that just a few important aspects can be mentioned here. Due to similarities and contrasts in representation and film form, the characters are grouped or isolated as artefacts. Four main types can be distinguished: mainstream main characters, stereotypes, caricatures, and realistic minor characters. Rick and Ilsa conform to mainstream conventions of realism. They resemble narrative types (damsel in distress, tough guy), but are given additional nuances and idealised as well as individualised. Their inner flaws, conflicts, and developments contribute to the impression of multidimensionality. Moreover, they are played by famous stars whose images enhance the characterisation. In contrast, a second group of characters is extremely simple and stereotypical. As a moral hero, Victor Laszlo is 'a knight in shining armour', and Paul Henreid's flat acting style keeps him to limited to that. The Nazi soldiers all appear in their role as an enemy occupying force,

though Conrad Veidt, a refugee himself, gives his character, Major Strasser, a cultivated and diabolical touch. Despite the charisma of actor Arthur Wilson, the piano player Sam largely conforms to the stereotype of an Uncle Tom, a self-sacrificing Black servant. In a third group of characters, the stereotypes are exaggerated to make them comic caricatures through behaviour, dialogue, and acting style: the Italian fascist at the film's beginning that no one takes seriously, the indefatigable pickpocket, and the elderly couple that is learning English ('How much watch?'). On the other hand, the casting of several minor refugee characters injects a certain degree of realism—the actors in fact escaped the Nazis by fleeing to the United States. Among these character groups Captain Renault once again stands out as an interesting exception. Claude Rains had already made a name for himself as an Oscar-nominated character actor. In contrast to Rick and Ilsa, whose conception and acting more closely resemble those of a melodrama or spy film, Renault is more of a comic figure, though the underlying type of the French rogue and charming opportunist is relativised by Renault's position as the prefect of police and additional character traits make his character more complex and subtle.

In looking at the characters, their traits, interactions, and relationships, we will focus on their relation to the *value structure* to keep the analysis concise. The spectrum in regard to physicality is relatively narrow. All characters are in good health, most of them are attractive (according to cultural standards) or at least look interesting, and some are also exceptionally beautiful. Physical strength and fitness have little if any importance, as social skills are essential. The spectrum of psychological and social traits is extremely large, extending from the cold, evil Major Strasser through the opportunistic Renault and the struggling Rick and Ilsa to the noble resistance fighter Victor Laszlo. The value structure is unambiguous, though at times it is difficult to judge the ambivalent or unclear motives of Rick and Ilsa. The distribution of values is to some extent gradual. Laszlo, Rick, and Ilsa are idealised and the final antagonist, Major Strasser, represents their negative moral pole, but Rick and Ilsa, and even more the shapeshifter and trickster Renault, also have (endearing) flaws.

Nevertheless, the value structure is centred on the protagonist. Overall, Rick is the most positively portrayed character. While Laszlo demonstrates higher moral principles early on and can be considered equally intelligent and good looking, Rick surpasses him by giving up Ilsa and joining the resistance. Moreover, from the beginning he has many positive traits that Laszlo lacks: psychological complexity, a sense of humour, a quick wit, energy, coolness, vitality, erotic appeal, a high social status, the confident control of a complex role set, and especially power. Rick's traits are underlined by several parallel, contrast, and commentator characters. For instance, he is judged according to Laszlo's moral standard, is more confident than Ugarte, and is more introverted than Renault. Ilsa's beauty is highlighted by means of the staging and Renault's comments; her morals, bearing and dignity through comparison with Rick's short-term lover Yvonne. Thus, the other characters' esteem and comparisons with them stress Ilsa's appearance and morals and Rick's status, confidence, and power.

While the characters' movements are coordinated harmoniously through the staging, the conflict density is exceptionally high. For example, Rick as the protagonist is not just involved in the story's three central conflicts (see above), but also in many more local conflicts, such as manifest or latent conflicts with guests refused entrance to the café, with Yvonne because of their separation, with Strasser and Renault because of the letters of transit and his support for Laszlo, with Laszlo and Ilsa because of his past romance with her, or with Renault because he helps the Bulgarian couple. Of the relationships of attraction, Rick and Ilsa's conflict-laden romance is, of course, extremely significant. At the same time, Rick is linked with Renault, Laszlo, Sam, and his other employees through mutual affinity, and he is the recipient of one-sided admiration from other characters, such as Ugarte. These relationships of attraction and rejection are conveyed primarily by dialogue and subtexts, nonverbal communication and exchanged glances (above all between Rick and Ilsa, though Rick frequently assumes the role of observer, and Ilsa that of the object of the gaze).



Fig. 39 In the Marseillaise scene in *Casablanca*, all the characters take sides with one of the conflicting groups, as is shown by their positions and posture as well as their singing. (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.)

An explicit *grouping* and polarisation of the characters takes place in the 'La Marseillaise' scene, when the café guests, led by Laszlo and Rick, face down Strasser and the singing Nazi soldiers (Figure 39). This scene condenses the more general allocation of characters to particular socio-political groups in the film: the Nazis (Strasser and his soldiers) and

their reluctant collaborators (Renault and his police officers) face the persecuted refugees (Rick's customers and employees) and the active resistance fighters (Laszlo, Ilsa, Karl). Alongside those who benefit from the situation (Ferrari, Ugarte, the pickpocket) and the uninvolved characters (the Arabs). Initially, Rick occupies a neutral stance, then changes under Ilsa's and Laszlo's influence, and sides with the resistance fighters, impressing Renault with his heroic example and, with it, convinces him to join the resistance. Thus, the characters that exercise the greatest amount of influence on the far-reaching developments of others are Ilsa, Laszlo, and Rick.

Many features of the character constellation in *Casablanca* are typical of Hollywood cinema, also in terms of symbolism and symptomatology, perspective, and affective involvement (which will be discussed in more detail in Part VII). Rick, as a morally positive, socially and physically attractive protagonist with agency, receives the most attention and is at the top of the hierarchy of values. He is the essential meaning-bearer of the film, and imaginative closeness and affective involvement focus on him and Ilsa. Rick is also the character with the most social relationships; he is involved in the most conflicts and draws the most recognition and affection. Unlike most Hollywood protagonists, however, Rick is relatively passive and does not take on decisive action until relatively late in the film; other characters, such as Ilsa, take on that role until then.

The constellation of characters is also typical of the positioning and evaluation of members of different social groups. The male protagonist Rick develops into a centre of morality and power and is the hero of the story, while his temporary antagonist, Ilsa, becomes the object and recipient of his action, loses her initial activity and integrity, and must be saved by Rick in a double sense—physically and morally. The white American Rick is portrayed with nuance, while the Black American Sam is reduced to his stereotypical role as a devoted servant and entertainer. The continental Europeans provide a comic element with their poor English and amusing accents (although French and Arabic are spoken in Morocco). The actual population of the country, the Moroccan Arabs, appear only as exotic extras; the only Arab with a minuscule speaking role is a shady bazaar merchant. *Casablanca*, a classic work of cinematic art, is thus also unmistakably influenced by the ethnocentric, racist, and patriarchal attitudes of its time and culture.

In summary, positioning individual characters in the social and aesthetic network of a constellation is crucial not only for their characterisation and narrative function. Because stories focus on people and action, the motifs and constellations of characters are also particularly relevant to their analysis as symbols and symptoms. Theories of film and narrative show that characters and their behaviour are in fact the main point of reference for interpretation and ideology critique, they define what premises and dispositions interpretation and critique are based on, and what criteria can guide it. These aspects will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

10.8 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions on Character Constellations and Stereotyping

1. How many characters are in the constellation in total? How many main, secondary, and minor characters are there?
2. How does the constellation develop as the characters' scenic configurations change? What is the extent and length of the individual configurations? When do characters appear, which characters always appear together, and which always appear alone?
3. How is the film's hierarchy of attention structured? When, how, and in what regard are character hierarchies established, when can the main characters be recognised as such?
4. What plot functions do the characters perform, and how do they relate to each other as a result? What are the characters' goals? Which of them overlap, which conflict? Which characters function as protagonists, antagonists, their helpers, the story's initiator, target object, receiver, and decider?
5. What constellations of conflicts and what protagonist-antagonist relationships are present? Are there several protagonists or antagonists?
6. What other functions do characters perform beyond their role in the plot—as narrators, conveyors of information, focalisers, carriers of meaning, objects of spectacle, emotional triggers, parallel or contrast characters, etc.? Are there any characters without a relevant function?
7. How are the characters different or similar as artefacts, in other words, in terms of their representation (acting style, etc.), the way they provide information, or in more general qualities as artefacts, such as their degree of realism, typification, or complexity? Can groups be recognised, such as individualised and stereotyped characters?
8. How is the spectrum of diegetic traits structured? Which physical, psychological, and social traits are particularly conspicuous or frequent? Which are significantly absent?
9. How is the character constellation orchestrated? How are the traits distributed among the characters? Which traits are the most important? Which characters are grouped together, which are isolated from the others, and what effect does this have? Are there contrast characters, parallel characters, analogies, symmetries, polar opposites, or complementary characters?
10. What interactions relate characters to each other? How can the choreography of characters' movements be described? Who perceives whom, how often and how? Who communicates with whom in what manner?

11. What are the characters' manifest and latent social relationships? Which relationships of attraction and rejection, eroticism, and conflict stand out within the constellation? What relationships of power, esteem, and affection are there? To what extent are the characters' relationships pre-structured by social systems and how do characters behave within these social contexts (dogmatically, opportunistically, rebelliously, etc.)? How do the characters' social relationships develop over time? Which characters influence the development of others?

12. Which positions do the characters assume within the constellation's value structure? How are moral, aesthetic, and other social values distributed? What degree of breadth (spectrum), centredness, gradation, and (un)ambiguousness does the value structure possess? Is the spectrum of values broad or narrow, near the top or bottom of the range between positive and negative? Is the constellation polarised with 'good' and 'bad' characters, or are the values distributed equally among them? Does a certain character represent the centre of the constellation (morally or in regard to other values)?

13. How do the characters relate to each other as symbols conveying indirect or higher meanings (see Chapter 11)?

14. How do the characters relate to each other as symptoms indicating certain connections to reality (see Chapter 12)?

15. What is the structure of perspectives in the character constellation (see Chapter 13)? Which characters are given a perspective of perceiving, thinking, wishing, evaluating, or feeling (through information about their inner lives), and which are denied such perspectives? Is the structure of perspectives centred on a single character (monoperspective), or are several perspectives distributed among several characters (polyperspective)? What degree of imaginative closeness or distance is generated in relation to each character?

16. How is the viewers' affective involvement intended to be distributed among the characters (see Chapter 14)? Which characters trigger positive feelings of sympathy or empathy, which seem to be neutral or uninteresting, which cause negative or dissonant affects?

17. Do characters occupy typical clusters in the positions named in the preceding questions, e.g., as a positively assessed protagonist at the top of the hierarchy of attention and in the centre of the value structure?

18. Which positions within the character constellation are assigned the members of various social groups (e.g., according to race, class, gender, age, nation, religion, sexual orientation)? What is the demographic structure of the constellation?

Questions for the Analysis of Social Stereotyping in Film and Other Media

1. Are the characters portrayed as members or representatives of certain social groups? Which social groups or identities are represented, and which are absent or marginalised?
2. To what extent do the characters correspond to (or contradict) certain widespread stereotypes and prejudices about their groups?
3. Are certain characters meant to represent a social group as a whole or are they portrayed more as individuals? Are they portrayed as belonging to several groups at the same time and endowed with a complex social identity (intersectionality)? Are they individualised or typified by the form of their portrayal?
4. What other members of the same group are there within the character constellation? To what extent do they differ from each other, in terms of their traits, functions, forms and evaluation? Are all characters of a group (even those with different characteristics) evaluated positively or negatively (through narrative comments, perspective, etc.)? Are they contrasted with characters from another group who are evaluated differently?
5. What physical, psychological, and social characteristics are attributed to the characters as members of their group? Do they exemplify, embody, or represent certain positive or negative qualities, virtues, or vices? Are these traits associated with their social group in general? Are there positive or negative traits that are particularly emphasised in the characters of a particular social group? What psychological and social characteristics are conveyed by their external appearance?
6. What position do the characters (and thus the members of their social group) have within the hierarchy of attention of the character constellation (as main, secondary, or minor characters)? Do all main characters belong to a particular social group, while members of other groups only appear as minor or secondary characters?
7. What narrative roles and functions do the characters (and thus the members of their social group) take on in the story, for example as protagonist, antagonist, helper, victim? Do members of certain groups only appear in antagonistic roles or as needy victims? What degree of agency do they have?
8. What social status do the characters (as members of a social group) have within the character constellation, high, medium, or low? Are certain social groups associated with a low status?
9. What is the viewers' imaginative closeness or distance to the characters (as members of different social groups)? Does the film invite the audience to take the perspective of these characters on the events or not? Does it make it (im)possible to adopt the perspective that characters from certain social groups have on the events of the story?

10. Are the characters from certain groups confronted with common human problems or (only) group-specific ones? To what extent are group-specific problems not only thematised, but also made comprehensible to different audience groups?

11. How are the characters from certain social groups shaped by the use of media-specific devices and techniques? Are narrative techniques and audiovisual means used stereotypically or in innovative ways (e.g., by avoiding 'lighting for whiteness')?

12. How do the characters of certain groups appear in the image, are they at the centre or on the periphery, seen at eye level, from above or below? How do other stylistic devices such as lighting, camera, staging, set design work in this respect? What role does sound play, for example, are characters from certain groups associated with unpleasant noises and others with pleasant, emotional music?

PART VI: CHARACTERS AS SYMBOLS AND SYMPTOMS: INTERPRETATION AND IMPACT

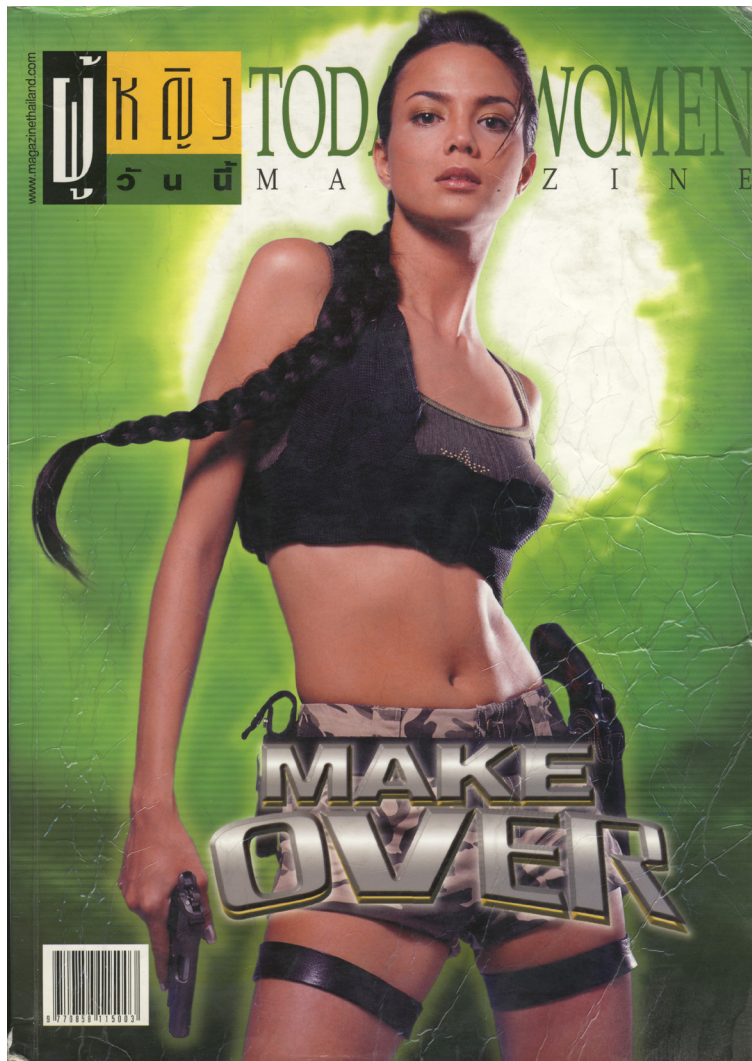


Fig. 40 Popular characters can influence a global audience. The cover of the Thai *Today's Women* Magazine (August 2001) shows an Asian model as Lara Croft; the magazine provides advice on how women can use make-up and clothing to resemble various movie characters.

Part VI

The previous chapters have shown how characters are perceived as represented beings with physical, mental and social traits (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6) and at the same time as artefacts shaped by media technologies, representational devices, narrative strategies and aesthetic conventions (Chapter 7 and Chapter 8). In both respects, individual characters are integrated in larger contexts, particularly in constellations and plots (Chapter 9 and Chapter 10). We can observe Rick as a disillusioned idealist interacting with friends and foes in *Casablanca*, and at the same time recognise that he is played by Humphrey Bogart and fulfils narrative functions as the protagonist.

However, there are further ways of experiencing characters that have been neglected in many or even most theories. They concern the ways in which characters convey meanings and interact with reality. Based on the perception of characters as artefacts and inhabitants of storyworlds, viewers also draw inferences about their deeper meaning and their causes and effects in our own world. For instance, we can see Rick as a personification of the United States in the Second World War, or as a role model demonstrating that personal sacrifice strengthens one's integrity. We can ask ourselves what motivated the filmmakers to create Rick, what sociocultural factors influenced his creation, or what effects he had on contemporary audiences or subsequent films. In dealing with such semantic and pragmatic relationships of the character, and building on the model of reception outlined in Chapter 3, this chapter distinguishes between two kinds of experiences and related questions:

- When we analyse characters as *symbols*, the basic questions concern what higher-order, generalised, or abstract meanings they convey. What do they stand for? Or in terms of reception: How do they evoke inferences about higher meanings in the audience?
- When we analyse characters as *symptoms*, the basic questions concern causality: which individual and sociocultural factors were involved in their creation and what effects they have on their audiences? Why are the characters the way they are, and what consequences does this have? Or in terms of reception: What assumptions with regard to their causes and effects in reality do characters trigger in the viewers?

The terms 'symbol' and 'symptom' are thus used here in a broad sense as umbrella terms, each covering a wide range of different phenomena, which will be discussed in more detail later. The two sets of questions connected to these terms are closely related, but at the same time analytically distinct, because they concern different levels of experience and interpretation: the first question is about what the characters mean, the second about what their meaning means for the social reality of their creators and viewers. The first question is directed at higher-order meanings that can be derived from the characters and the depicted world. The second question is aimed at the

concrete causality of extra-filmic reality and the communicative contexts and practices in which characters are shaped, disseminated and circulated with all their meanings, including symbolic ones.

The study of characters as symbols and symptoms is often considered a central part of the interpretation of artworks, as for example in Erwin Panofsky's classical model of iconographic analysis and iconological interpretation (Panofsky 1972; Büttner and Gottdang 2006: 21). Various approaches to interpretation are employed in studies of film, literature, and other arts and media, including biographical, sociological, historical, psychological, and intertextual approaches, which can be further differentiated according to more specific concepts, such as intentionalist, Marxist, feminist, or psychoanalytical interpretation (cf. Descher et al. 2015; Hermerén 1983). Interpretation is also often seen as a part of, or precondition to critique of ideology or research on audiences and media effects. But despite the important role characters play in interpretation, there is still no comprehensive theory that systematically addresses how characters relate to meaning and reality. This gap is particularly noticeable in the field of cognitive theories, which view characters almost exclusively as represented beings and artefacts (e.g., Smith 1995).

Moreover, in film studies there are surprisingly few general theories of interpretation. Influential approaches even criticise interpretation as a pointless, unfounded, banal, or schematic endeavour, a simplification of the polysemy of art and a limitation of aesthetic experience. Some have generally argued 'against interpretation' of art (Sontag 1966), others against the dubious critical business of 'Interpretation Inc.' (Bordwell 1989), emphasising instead the importance of form, style, or sensory experience in appreciating art. This is often directed against psychoanalytical, feminist, postcolonial or ideology-critical approaches as in British cultural studies, which approach 'character as an embodiment of abstract social and political values, and conflict between characters as an enactment of social conflict' (Fiske 1997: 159). But no matter how one evaluates these or other practices of interpretation, their critique just proves that they are a psychological and social fact that must be taken into account if one wants to understand characters.

The difficult subject of analysing and interpreting characters as symbols and symptoms would require an in-depth study, but this part of the book must be limited to a brief overview of central arguments and theoretical distinctions. The main aim is to show why this kind of analysis and interpretation is not only relevant, but even indispensable. Even if not every character triggers assumptions about second-order meanings or extra-filmic contexts, in fact a great many characters do, and this can be essential to the filmmakers' intentions and the viewers' experience (see examples in Chapter 4 and other chapters). In countless cases, the above questions form the starting point or the ultimate goal of examining characters, not only in the professional context of academic or journalistic criticism but also in fan forums or cinema foyers. Interpretation is a common practice among ordinary viewers and a fact that needs to

be understood. It involves specific forms of affect, insight, and evaluation that often make characters and films more interesting and need to be explained and appreciated. Moreover, if we want to understand how characters affect individual viewers, social groups, or even whole societies, we also need to know how they are interpreted by relevant audiences. Finally, and crucially, interpretation feeds back into the experience of characters as represented beings and artefacts. This means that approaches to analysing characters that ignore their interpretation as symbols and symptoms will be incomplete and often misleading.

But what is interpretation, after all? What could be criteria for successful interpretations? And how is interpretation related to the ideological critique of characters and their effects? While there are numerous different theories of interpretation in literary studies (see Descher et al. 2015), the field is much more limited in contemporary film studies. Here, the most elaborated and influential theories are probably those by David Bordwell (1989) and Noël Carroll (1998b) (see also Wilson 2008). Carroll states that ‘interpretation is the explanation of the presence of a feature or set of features in a film, whether such explanation is (broadly semantic or) thematic, or functional or even causal (in terms, for example, of emotional effects)’ (Carroll 1998b: 6). Following this definition, interpreting characters would in a first sense mean asking why they and their traits, actions or relationships are present in a film, and offering an explanation by showing that the characters or their features perform certain functions or have certain effects, such as conveying information, suggesting themes, or evoking emotions. In a second sense, interpreting characters could also mean explaining the presence of other narrative and stylistic elements in the film by pointing to their functions in conveying characters’ traits and inner life. For example, a gloomy setting, an unbalanced composition, shaky camera movements, discordant editing and a nervous acting style might all function to convey a character’s despair; and a narrative sequence of distressing events might serve the same function. Of course, this also works the other way around: it is inferred that the character must be desperate because the presence of such narrative and stylistic elements could not otherwise be explained. George Wilson calls this ‘narrative interpretation’ (2008). Following Carroll or Wilson, there would thus be two senses of ‘interpreting characters’: as symbols and symptoms, on the one hand, and as represented beings and artefacts, on the other.¹ This chapter focuses on the first, as the second has already been dealt with in previous chapters of this book under the headings of ‘character synthesis’ and ‘analysis’ rather than ‘interpretation’ (see Chapters 5, 6, and 9).

According to Carroll, interpretation as causal or functional explanation may aim at aesthetic appreciation as well as ideology critique of films. However, he distinguishes

1 Wilson’s approach (as stated in Wilson 2008) could be understood in some of his publications as a call to focus exclusively on ‘narrative interpretation’ and to disregard symbolic and symptomatic interpretation. However, for the reasons given in this book (especially in Chapters 3, 4 and this chapter), this would be a serious mistake.

interpretation both from empirical reception studies and from 'symptomatic interpretations' that emphasise ideological contradictions in the film rather than unity of meaning (1998a: 8–10). My approach to analysing characters as symbols and symptoms is more inclusive in this respect (more on that later). The umbrella terms 'symbol' and 'symptom' already indicate that it draws on David Bordwell's important book *Making Meaning* (1989). However, it also deviates from his account on several points.

Bordwell develops one of the most sophisticated theories of interpretation not only in film studies but across disciplines. I will therefore present it in more detail. He starts from the assumption that viewers construct four kinds of cinematic meaning (1989: 8–9): 1) a 'referential meaning' in the represented world, its events and inhabitants; 2) an 'explicit meaning' in messages that are directly communicated through the film, such as when narrators state the moral of the story in their voice-over; 3) an 'implicit meaning' that is also intended, but conveyed in less obvious, indirect ways; and 4) an unintended 'symptomatic meaning' that may be at odds with the others and that is attributed to individual or sociocultural causes. Bordwell illustrates this distinction with Hitchcock's *Psycho*: the referential meaning includes Marion Crane's journey to Norman Bates's motel and the murderous events there. An explicit meaning is that insanity sometimes overwhelms reason. An implicit meaning might be that no clear distinction can be made between reason and insanity, and a symptomatic meaning that *Psycho* reflects Hitchcock's male fear of female sexuality.

Bordwell's concept of interpretation differs from Carroll's. Bordwell assumes that referential and explicit meanings are identified through processes of 'comprehension', while implicit and symptomatic meanings involve the more problematic area of 'interpretation', a main area of critics' work in the context of journalistic or academic institutions. In Bordwell's view, interpretation is a constructive activity that follows cultural conventions and proceeds by 'mapping' selected textual patterns onto general 'semantic fields' in order to construct a plausible nexus of meanings.² On the one hand, the critics search for salient patterns on the level of representation (camera, sound, editing) and of what is represented (the storyworld, its spaces, inhabitants, and events). On the other hand, they draw on abstract units of meaning that are generally considered relevant in their cultural context, such as psychoanalytical theories or ideas of alienation in modern society. In order to relate cinematic cues and semantic fields to each other in a meaningful way, various mental schemata for genres, characters, filmmakers, and text structures are applied. This includes the 'person schema', which is used to personify and interpret filmmakers and spectators as well as characters, narration, 'the camera' and other elements of audiovisual style.

Bordwell's theory of interpretation is concerned with films in general, but he emphasises that interpretive practices and their underlying schemata usually place

2 See the diagram in Bordwell 1989: 203.

characters, their developments and interrelations at the centre of meaning-making (ibid.: Chapters 7 and 8). Characters—particularly their goals and conflicts, their similarities and differences, their dialogues and gazes—normally command most of the viewers' attention and provide the most important interpretive cues:

In mapping semantic fields onto the film, the simplest strategy is to assign different units of meaning to different characters. Pick out a range of behaviors, a set of traits, a line of dialogue, a costume, or some other cues. Then make them, by virtue of the representativeness heuristic, stand for an abstract semantic value. Typically, what a character is or has can be translated into what the character means. (ibid.: 154)

Often, characters are put at the centre of a core-periphery schema of interpretation that links their meanings (core, first level) to those of the surrounding storyworld (second level) and the cinematic style (third level) in order to create a unity of cinematic meanings (ibid.: 171). The storyworld is then interpreted as supporting the characters' meanings, for instance, through symbolic spaces and objects (e.g., mirrors as symbolising identity). Stylistic elements, again, are seen as supporting the meaningful features of both storyworlds and characters; a dreary setting, an unbalanced composition, and discordant music may express the protagonist's alienation, thereby exemplifying the alienation of society in general. Further, temporal schemata are employed to interpret the arrangement of events and audiovisual motifs in the course of the film. Repeated 'objects, colors, lines of dialogue, elements of lighting or setting or costume, recurrent framings or musical passages' (ibid.: 187) are set in relation to the characters' experiences, their trajectories to a goal, or their mental or social developments, such as in a *Bildungsroman*, a hero's journey, a downfall, or an Oedipal arc. Alternatively, features of storyworld and style may also be interpreted as a commentary by filmmakers or narrators on the characters' traits and fates.

According to Bordwell, such common schemas of interpretation can focus either on implicit meanings or on symptomatic meanings. An 'explicatory criticism' in search for implicit, thematic meanings dominated in the 1950s and 1960s (ibid.: 42–70, 107–09). Critics interpreted films, above all, as meaningful artworks by individual *auteurs*, often with the goal of establishing film studies as an academic discipline like art history. The semantic fields that were searched for in films conformed to the humanist tradition and its themes, which related to individual life experience, morals, and the human condition, e.g., human suffering, identity, alienation, the ambiguity of perception, the mystery of behaviour, the difficulty involved in communication, or values such as freedom, religion, enlightenment, creativity, and imagination. Bordwell quotes literary scholar Ronald S. Crane, who outlined the framework of relevant meanings with the following oppositions:

life and death ... , good and evil, love and hate, harmony and strife, order and disorder, eternity and time, reality and appearance, truth and falsity, certainty and doubt, true insight and false opinion, imagination and intellect ... , emotion and reason, complexity and simplicity, nature and art, the natural and the supernatural, nature as benign and

nature as malignant, man as spirit and man as beast, the needs of society and individual desires, internal states and outward acts, engagement and withdrawal. (Crane 1953: 123–24, quoted in Bordwell 1989: 107)

This summary of cinematic themes in ‘explicatory criticism’ seems still relevant today, and the same applies to the alternative interpretative approach of ‘symptomatic reading’. Since the 1970s, Bordwell says, a different spectrum of meanings and a socially critical view of films has come into the foreground (*ibid.*: Chapter 4). Scholars in the field of feminist film theory, among others, began to regard films and other artworks primarily as involuntary expressions of symptomatic meanings, such as social power structures or sexual desires. The most important semantic fields no longer focused on the individual, concentrating instead on how people are shaped by society through sexuality, semiosis, and politics. Key terms such as the following are predominant: power, pleasure, knowledge, repression, the body, social class, ideology, illusion, politics of representation/representation of politics, presence/absence, male violence/female victimisation, exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, narcissism, or hysteria (*ibid.*: 109–10). Fate is replaced by power and subjection, love by law and desire, individual by subject and object, art by signification. In some cases, the ‘explanatory’ and the ‘symptomatic’ discourses of interpretation coincide and share some semantic fields such as, for example, individual/society, fantasy/reality, order/disorder, and self-reflexivity (*ibid.*: 109f.).

Bordwell subjects both directions of interpretation to a scathing critique, arguing that they mostly fail to do justice to individual films and all too often produce schematic, uninteresting, predictable results. For example, he claims that many psychoanalytical film interpretations proceed according to the following schema:

Take male characters to be functioning as father figures or undergoing the Oedipal trajectory. Take female characters to be playing the role of mother or as posing a castration threat. Then trace the ways in which (1) the male either (a) succeeds his father or (b) loses his identity; and (2) the woman is either (a) transformed into a fetish for male desire, (b) eliminated from the text, or (c) transported into a realm beyond patriarchal definition. (Bordwell 1989: 198)

In the face of such schematisms, the conclusion of Bordwell’s critique of film interpretation is that not so many implicit and symptomatic meanings should be read into films (or characters). Rather, the specific narrative and aesthetic forms of individual films should be analysed closely for their functions and effects, with careful attention to the specific characteristics and historical contexts of each film, particularly to relevant practices and conventions of film production (*ibid.*: 249–74). This is the aim of Bordwell’s own project of a ‘historical poetics’ of film. Its objective to offer ‘explanations, of an intentionalist, functionalist, or causal sort’ for *why* a film contains certain features (*ibid.*: 269) closely resembles Carroll’s account of interpretation. However, existing interpretations of implicit or symptomatic meaning are considered only as ‘protocols of reception, particularly within twentieth-century Western societies’,

which indicate two factors that together shape a film's meaning: the intentions of filmmakers and larger social forces (ibid.: 270).

Bordwell's book makes a crucial contribution to the theory of interpretation and contains numerous differentiations which are extremely useful also for analysing characters as symbols and symptoms. My own approach draws on his theory of interpretation and has some obvious parallels: the character as represented being corresponds to Bordwell's referential meaning, the character as symbol corresponds to explicit and implicit meaning (taken together) and the character as symptom corresponds to symptomatic meaning.

However, because of the arguments developed in previous parts of this book, my approach also differs significantly from Bordwell's in several respects. Firstly, Bordwell does not provide clear criteria for deciding when exactly a meaning should be considered explicit and when implicit. Because any criteria for that would be extremely vague and audience-dependent, I join the two categories in a single field of symbolic—i.e., higher, second-order, abstract, or general—meanings that go beyond referential meaning and are at the same time distinct from symptomatic meaning. This field of higher meanings (conveyed by characters as symbols) could again be subdivided into different kinds. Per Persson, for instance, mentions '*thematic inferences*' concerning 'a *point* or *moral* of the film as a whole', as well as more local 'symbolical, associational, conceptual, and metaphorical understandings that transfer the literal meanings of motifs, events, and objects [and characters] ... to a higher level' (2003: 32; italics in the original).

Secondly, I do not adopt Bordwell's distinction between a supposedly straightforward 'comprehension' of referential and explicit meanings and an always problematic 'interpretation' of implicit and symptomatic meanings. As shown in Chapters 5 and 6, comprehending the characters' psyche and sociality itself already requires 'interpretation' in the sense of choosing and using various (folk-)theoretical concepts of the mind and sociality, which can already produce extremely different results on the referential or diegetic level (see also Wilson's concept of 'narrative interpretation'; 2008). The filmic cues that guide character perception and mental model making can already enable an explicatory interpretation by indicating certain functions, such as steering the emotions. And most importantly, all levels of reception and meaning interact; a character's symbolic and symptomatic features often influence its understanding and experience as a represented being and artefact. For example, believing that Rick Blaine personifies a repressive idea of patriarchal masculinity may lead to a certain perception of him, to a focus of attention that leads to detecting more traits of repressive masculinity and including them in the character model. In some cases, the 'interpretation' of higher meanings is even easier and clearer than the 'comprehension' of referential meanings: for instance, recognising that a central character in Lang's *Destiny* or Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* is a conventional personification of death is easier than comprehending their strange actions and

motives in the storyworld. For such reasons, I refrain also from distinctions in film and literary studies that consider the 'analysis' of storyworld structures as objective or merely descriptive and the 'interpretation' of higher-level or contextual meanings as subjective or ideological.³

Chapters 3 to 6 of this book have shown that the distinction between analysis and interpretation should be based on other criteria. Both analysis and interpretation differ from spontaneous film experience, as conscious, methodical activities on a communicative meta-level are involved. Their purpose is reconstructing and explaining levels of reception or meaning. In 'analysis', however, an effort is made to reconstruct the experience of characters as represented beings and artefacts, while 'interpretation' involves two 'higher' levels of reception based on the mental character model: experiencing characters as symbols and symptoms. There are thus two different meanings of 'interpretation': the exploration of complex, not directly given properties of the character on the level of the storyworld ('narrative interpretation' in the sense of Wilson 2008), and the exploration of higher symbolic or symptomatic meanings.

The cases where characters are interpreted as symbols and symptoms can be described more precisely with the help of Göran Hermerén's general schema for interpretations: 'X interprets Y as Z for U in order to V' (Hermerén 1983: 142), which lays open that interpretations are always made by specific persons (X) for certain audiences (U) and purposes (V). For example, one might say that a film historian interprets Rick Blaine as an embodiment of US politics in order to explain to other film historians the political stance of the Warner Bros. Studio at the time; or that a viewer at the time interprets Rick as a model of masculine virtue for himself in order to follow his example; or that a feminist critic interprets Rick as the epitome of repressive masculinity to alert contemporary viewers to their naive understanding of Rick as a masculine ideal, and so on. This also shows that not only professional critics, but any viewers interpret films and characters in this sense.

A third and related problem with Bordwell's approach is that it does not clearly distinguish between questions about the intersubjective *meaning* of a character (or a film), the intended *functions* it fulfils, the *causes* to which its creation is attributed, its actual or presumed *effects*, and the ways in which individual viewers *perceive* all this. In order to capture these differences, I propose a reception-oriented perspective that distinguishes between empirical, intended and ideal reception of characters as symbols and as symptoms (see Chapter 3):

- When characters are analysed as symbols, the following central questions arise from a reception-related perspective: Which higher meanings are actually inferred by certain viewers in certain situations (empirical reception)? Which meanings *should* the character convey according to the filmmakers' intentions (intended character reception)? Which does it

3 On this distinction, see also Carroll 1998b: 6, 333; in literary studies, Jahraus 1994.

convey in the case of optimal communication according to relevant norms (ideal character reception)? And how does this happen in each individual case; what cues trigger inferences about the character's second-order meanings?

- When characters are analysed as symptoms, the following central questions arise from a reception-related perspective: Which individual and sociocultural *causes and factors* on the sides of the filmmakers and viewers are responsible for specific forms of empirical, intended, or ideal character reception? What individual and sociocultural effects and consequences does the character have in reality? And which of these causes and effects of characters are *perceived or imagined* by viewers in cases of empirical, intended, or ideal reception?

Such a reception-oriented perspective makes it possible to understand that what Bordwell calls 'symptomatic meaning' has a certain systematic structure. As will be outlined later, the level of symptomatic meaning involves inferences about all elements of the film's pragmatic and communicative context, including the filmmakers, the conditions of film production and distribution, the sociocultural situation, the potential or actual audiences, or the effects on society (see also Persson 2003: 33–34).⁴

Moreover, the reception-oriented perspective suggests some basic criteria for the validity of interpretations that go beyond the merely pragmatic or idiosyncratic rules of the interpretation discourses named by Bordwell. As explained before, viewers' dispositions for character reception can be found on different levels and possess varying degrees of intersubjectivity. The schemata used for interpretation are partially rooted in folk psychology, and they are not completely contingent, but partly based on general human or largely intersubjective tendencies, such as feeling interest in other people or being able to recognise general affective valences. Such intersubjective tendencies of interpretation may be inborn and a product of evolution (as assumed by Grodal 1999), they may result from widespread commonalities of human corporeality, psyche, and life experiences (such as growing up, loving, experiencing pro- or antisocial behaviour, aging, being ill, or being confronted with death), or they may be based on rules, values and bodies of knowledge that are common in a particular culture. Thus, for instance, not all semantic fields in humanistic and socially critical interpretation presented by Bordwell are arbitrary. At least some of them most probably refer to basic human experiences that make the motives and interactions of film protagonists particularly relevant for many or even most viewers. In short, like the comprehension of characters as represented beings, their higher-level interpretation can be partly justified and evaluated with reference to collective dispositions and communicative

4 Persson also includes aesthetic value judgements about the film (2003: 33–34). However, I have assigned them a separate category, the character as artefact, due to their significance and their close connection to preconscious sensation and perception; see Part I of this book.

rules. In addition, the validity of interpretations depends on the explicative role of artefact properties and particularities of narrative and audiovisual design mentioned by Carroll (and Bordwell himself). Furthermore, the general criteria for the success of interpretations include the context, comprehensibility and conspicuousness of the film information used as well as the generation of coherence, unity of meaning and connections to reality on this basis. Stefan Descher and his co-authors mention the criteria of 'plausibility, probability, completeness or comprehensiveness, accuracy or specificity, correctness, coherence, logical consistency or freedom from contradiction, informativeness, simplicity or economy, elegance, coherence, clarity, complexity, interestingness, relevance, fruitfulness or connectivity, novelty or originality' (2015: 47). Further, more specific criteria for interpretation could be added to this list.

Against this background, I also refrain from Bordwell's overall negative assessment of (implicitly) symbolic and symptomatic interpretation, even if it was perhaps not entirely unjustified in view of a profusion of schematic readings. Indeed, there are many unconvincing interpretations of *Casablanca* claiming, for example, that Rick exhibits an Oedipal development, with Ilsa in the mother role and her husband in the father role (Gabbard and Gabbard 1990). However, to generally refuse to interpret films and characters in the light of their higher meanings and their relationships to reality simply because many interpretations are banal, far-fetched, or schematic would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Studying characters as symbols can lead to important insights into life and the deeper meaning of films. Studying them as symptoms can help explain many issues of creativity, culture and society, and offers potential for their critique. Both contributes to a better general understanding of our film experience. In the following brief sections, I will attempt to make this a bit clearer and distinguish between various aspects of characters as symbols and symptoms.

II. Characters as Symbols: How Characters Convey Higher-Level Meanings

The notoriously ambiguous term 'symbol' is used here in the broad sense that an element of the storyworld functions as a secondary sign conveying some higher, abstract, figurative, or indirect meaning. We can speak of 'higher' meaning here because it presupposes grasping at least some basic features of the character as a represented being, on which it can build. Many different theories of art and meaning meet in this very general understanding.¹ Some try to specify such meaning relations by referring to metaphorical processes which create emergent meanings by linking or blending mental representations of different realms.² For instance, Trevor Whittock understands filmic metaphor as a form of 'seeing-as' (e.g., seeing a movie character as a virtue, a vice, or another person from real life or ancient myths) that interrelates both aspects of what is seen; accordingly, a filmic metaphor is 'the reconsideration of one thing in terms of some other taken from a different domain' (1990: 126). In this way, the mental model of a character can activate further mental schemata, prototypes or propositions.³ The widespread assumption that symbols and metaphors are not suitable for the medium of film is patently false. In fact, symbolic characters play an essential role in a wide range of films, from commercial superhero flicks to surrealist and experimental films, Japanese animé or classics by filmmakers like Luis Buñuel,

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- 1 See the conceptual history in Seils 1998. For the most part, theoretical essays about symbolism are rare in film studies. The definitions of symbols in art history and literary studies approximately correspond to the ones I use, though they are often somewhat narrower. According to them, a symbol is 'a sensory sign for ideas, mental representations, or concepts' (Büttner and Gott dang 2006: 128; cf. Ubl 2003: 342). 'The character as a concrete figure stands for abstract connotations as a sign that generates meaning and significance' (Wunderlich 1989: 9). For a psychoanalytical concept of symbolism as an 'indirect and transmitted mode of understanding an idea, a conflict, an unconscious wish' with which manifest content of behaviours, thoughts, or statements with latent meanings of mostly sexual nature are connected, see Laplanche and Pontalis 1999: 481–86.
 - 2 See, for example, Whittock 1990; Thiele 2006; Hogan 2003a: Chapter 4; Fahlenbrach 2003. One of the ways that Thiele explains metaphorical processes in film is as a 'counterdetermination of a text through its context, an interaction or projection of semantic areas that activates primarily the level of connotations' (2006: 155).
 - 3 Of course, characters can also be characterised by symbols or metaphors, but what is important here is that they themselves function as symbols or metaphors.

Andrei Tarkowski, or Maya Deren. What needs to be clarified, however, is what kinds of indirect meaning characters can stand for and what ‘stand for’ actually means in this context. In answering these questions, one can draw on more specific theories of themes and symbols in the narrower sense, as well as theories of interpretation, exemplification, expression, allegory, personification, metaphor, metonymy, and further forms of figurative representation.⁴



Fig. 41 At the beginning of *Citizen Kane*, the dying Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles) utters the enigmatic word ‘Rosebud’. (Dir. Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane*, 1941, RKO Pictures/Mercury Productions, USA. All rights reserved.)

4 See, for information on symbolism, metaphors, and other audiovisual tropes, the last footnotes; for information on themes, see Bremond, Landy, and Pavel 1995; for information on exemplification, see Goodman 1976: Section II.3; Yacavone 2015: Chapter 5. With the aid of such theories, symbolising, exemplifying, and allegorical/personifying characters in a narrower sense can be distinguished more precisely. In the same way as with allegory, ‘while a single element of the text also represents a general issue [...] during the formation of symbols [...]—in this case, the symbolic sign performs not only this referential function: A symbol already has, independently of its value as a symbol, an existence and an intrinsic semantic value. Thus, a primary context of meaning is, in addition, displaced by a secondary and partially analogous context of meaning’ (Fricke 2003: 550). Personification is the ‘illustration of a concept through a character that stands out due to their appearance, actions and attributes’ (Büttner and Gott dang 2006: 146), e.g., forces of nature, concepts relating to human life (age, temperaments, death), ethical concepts (vices, virtues), concepts from the arts and sciences, politics and religion.

11.1 Characters and Their Higher-Level Meanings

A well-known example may illustrate what this is all about, Orson Welles' classic *Citizen Kane*. After the death of the mighty Charles Foster Kane, a reporter tries to understand Kane's nature and discover the meaning of his last word, 'Rosebud'. However, the reports of the people he interviews and their memories of Kane's life story are so fragmentary and contradictory that the reporter fails in his task. At the end of the film, the inscription 'Rosebud' can be seen on a burning sled from Kanes estate—the little boy had played with it when he was separated from his parents. Noël Carroll has pointed out that two irreconcilable interpretations of the film and its title character compete: the 'enigma interpretation' and the 'Rosebud interpretation' (1998b: 153–65). There are good arguments for both, and both can be used to explain coherently the functional relationship between many film elements. According to the enigma interpretation, Kane stands for the belief that every human being is ultimately an unsolvable mystery, an *individuum ineffabile* with a multitude of fleeting facets and identities, only glimpses of which are occasionally revealed to others. The overall narrative structure of the film, with its fragmentary interview flashbacks, already seems to show that Kane's identity is elusive, as each of the interviewees assesses him differently. The (fictional) newsreel footage at the beginning of the film also characterises Kane through a series of contradictory traits and actions: He appeared as a communist, a fascist, and an American patriot; he backed and opposed wars; he supported and vilified the same people. Kane's behaviour, such as his treatment of his friend Leland and his wife Susan, appears equally contradictory. His palatial residence, Xanadu, is an eclectic mixture of heterogeneous objects and styles; his extensive business empire a muddled conglomeration. On the level of visual metaphors, Kane's likeness is reproduced in various photographs and mirrors, and dialogues explicitly compare his life to his wife's puzzles. All of this suggests his enigmatic and contradictory nature in multiple ways.

However, there are equally good arguments for the Rosebud interpretation, which takes its name from the dying man's last word. According to this interpretation, Kane exemplifies the destructive effects separation from one's parents at an early age has on a person's personality and ability to feel love and have relationships. What other explanation is there for Kane's final word and the last scene, which shows the burning sled, than that they are references to Kane's childhood? Furthermore, the film repeatedly highlights Kane's inability to form friendships and romantic relationships. Both the working class, whose love and votes for his political campaigns he desires, and his wife, Susan, whom he forces to begin a career against her will, are dominated and treated with paternalism. Kane never shows consideration for the interests of his love objects. Should they fail to comply with his ideas—as is the case with Leland and Susan—he reacts with anger or withdraws. After several disappointments, Kane isolates himself in his castle, surrounded by statues that never talk back and animals that obey him. The film offers an explanation for this self-destructive behaviour: as a

young boy, Kane was taken away from his family to be raised by his banker, and the sled, Rosebud, reminds him of this fact and this moment. Kane himself discusses his mother's death and his search for his lost youth with Susan. The motif of separation and Kane's inability to feel love is thematised repeatedly, above all through Leland's and Susan's statements that he constantly confused love and possession. Since this characterisation does not contradict the other interviews, it possesses a high degree of authority. Analogous conclusions drawn by viewers require solely folk-psychological knowledge about the connection between loss and relationship problems.

In both interpretations, Kane represents the human personality in general. While both interpretations have ample justification, they are irreconcilable. A human's personality is either contradictory and unfathomable or it can be explained convincingly in relatively simple psychological terms, such as by referring to childhood experiences. Carroll suggests the following solution for this interpretation problem: films and their characters need not necessarily *mean* any single thing; they can also *do* or trigger something (Carroll 1998b: 161). *Citizen Kane* can prompt viewers to weigh the conflicting ideas suggested by its title character and compare the two possible interpretations, and also ask themselves whether humans are unfathomable or can be explained psychologically. That the film invites viewers to make their own decisions fits its other aesthetic characteristics well, such as the famous deep-focus shots that enable viewers to explore the image and concentrate on different levels of the action. In other words, Carroll does not claim that the film (or Kane the character) is polysemic or completely open to interpretation, but rather that they convey a conflict of clearly defined meanings. Through this ambivalence, Charles Foster Kane seems to deviate from mainstream character conventions (see Chapter 8), and Hollywood cinema seems to be not as free of symbolic layers as some describe it.

From this example and the findings in preceding chapters, some more general observations can be made. Carroll's interpretation aims neither at an empirical nor an author-intentionalist reception, but at a normative, ideal reception. It serves as a suggestion for other viewers to experience the film and its main character in a better, more interesting, richer way (by weighing up alternative meanings). However, interpretations that focus on the meanings intended by Welles or grasped by an empirical audience are also conceivable. Furthermore, the example illustrates a certain process of interpretation: different film information is linked together and together points to a general idea, yields a comprehensive, coherent meaning (or several such meanings that may contradict each other). Information about the depicted being—especially about his psyche, motives, and relationships—seems to be essential in this process. All three of the interpretations of *Citizen Kane* mentioned by Carroll (enigma, trauma, or contradiction) are based on inferences about the psyche of the main character. This points to the importance of (folk) psychological concepts for interpretation in general (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 6). At the same time, representational techniques (e.g., depth of field) and strategies of conveying information (e.g., discrepant flashbacks)

also support interpretations, which could be based on further analysis of the character as an artefact (see Chapter 7 and Chapter 8).

The example focuses on a specific, particularly important area of the analysis of characters as symbols: they can be carriers of the overarching theme, idea, question, or message of the entire work. Discourse analysts speak of 'thematic macrostructures' or 'macropropositions' that condense complex information and summarise the gist of a text (van Dijk 1985: 76). Readers or viewers produce such global mental representations through processes of selection, generalisation, and construction. The main theme of a film can be formulated as a condensed phrase, statement, or question, but it represents only the tip of an iceberg. Global themes are connected to a complex web of local and specific observations, thoughts, and feelings. For example, attributing an abstract theme such as 'childhood traumas cause personality disorders' to *Citizen Kane* implicitly associates with it various concrete ideas about the forms and consequences of such disorders. Approaches to 'thematics' or 'thematology' in literary studies model the construction of global meanings and overarching themes in a similar way: readers derive them from local motifs of content and form with the help of interpretive strategies, forming general propositions, conceptual networks, or labels for global meanings.⁵ Not all of the local motifs or sub-themes are necessarily connected into a seamless whole; films and other artworks usually contain polysemy, ambiguities, inconsistencies, and contradictions.

Viewers also draw conclusions about higher meanings not only from individual characters, but also from entire character constellations. Based on a comparison of characters, their traits and attitudes, the facets of a film's theme can be developed, and it can be represented in its various aspects and perspectives. This becomes obvious, for example, in Louis Malle's *Le feu follet*/*The Fire Within*. The protagonist, Alain Leroy—mid-thirties, attractive, educated, popular, with no financial problems—no longer sees a meaning to his life. He becomes an alcoholic, and his girlfriend leaves him after he is overcome by a depressive lack of interest, numbness, and an incapacity for love. In a final attempt to form intimate relationships, Leroy leaves the clinic where he has spent the past few months and goes to the city to see his old friends. One after another, their attitudes toward life are compared. Dubourg, an Egyptologist who has abandoned his dreams, settled for the minor joys of bourgeois family life, and occasionally takes refuge in mysticism. Eva, the artist, entertains feelings that resemble Leroy's, but has resigned herself to her fate and merely languishes in decadence, surrounded by arrogant, pseudo-profound bohemians. The politically radicalised Minville brothers attempt to arouse Leroy's interest in their secret organisation, though the only result of their activity is that they are constantly on the run from the police. The rich man Cyril and his wife, Solange, are absorbed by their social activities, though this only conceals a feeling of emptiness. Leroy feels like a stranger wherever he goes. He returns to

5 See the contributions in Bremond, Landy, and Pavel 1995, particularly the texts by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Cesare Segre, Menachem Brinker, and Lubomír Doležel.

the clinic and shoots himself, leaving behind a hostile farewell letter for his friends in which he accuses them of being superficial. All main characters have a problem similar to Leroy's: dealing with the realisation that the dream of intense experiences and relationships will never come true, that life's intensity and significance can lessen as one grows older. Youth 'was a promise. And a lie'. One after another, various solutions are examined: Dubourg's search for simple pleasures, Eva's resigned self-anaesthesia, the vain engagement of the Minville brothers, Cyril and Solange's substitution of real intensity with a mere fantasy of social glamour. Leroy rejects all these alternatives, and his solution is suicide. The film mixes moments of identification with the protagonist, and others of distancing from him, as a self-pitying, egocentric character, thereby challenging viewers—in a way similar to *Citizen Kane*—to make their own judgements and think through the various alternatives. In *Le feu follet*/*The Fire Within*, rather than a single character serving as a vehicle for carrying the film's entire theme, several characters embody different ways and problems of life.

The topic of how characters and their constellations function as thematic instances or theme carriers has been elaborated in more detail by various practical, often normative theories. For example, many screenwriting guides assume that themes are mostly linked to characters' values, needs, weaknesses, decisions, and developmental arcs, giving their stories relevance and cohesiveness (e.g., Newman 2001: #26). The manuals emphasise that themes should not be presented in a conspicuous way, such as by having characters talk about them directly, but rather conveyed more subtly, as a subtext of dialogue or through the progression of conflicts. When several different themes are present, an umbrella theme should be dominant, linking other subordinate, contrasting, or complementary themes. One way to do this is to juxtapose the characteristics and value systems of several characters, like those of Leroy and his friends, or those of a single character at different points in time, like the young and the old Kane. In this way, the manuals suggest, themes can be deepened and illustrated, conflicts heightened, and audiences stimulated. Moreover, it is possible to create thematic syntheses in this way, in which none of the opposing value systems simply dominates, but a more sophisticated and interesting question emerges. Other authors claim to have found 'the most effective cinematic themes', usually assuming that these 'coincide with the basic complexes of human emotional life' (Blothner 1999: 144). For instance, Dirk Blothner describes eighteen thematic 'basic complexes' involving 'typical problems [...] that drive every human's life and require them to find solutions' (ibid.: 48), including destruction/preservation, reversal/stability, attack/flight, or humiliation/triumph.

The thematic function of characters is only one, albeit important, part of their analysis as symbols. More generally, the systematic question is what can actually be symbolised by characters and in what way, for instance, through expression, exemplification, personification, metaphor, or metonymy. From a reception-theoretical point of view, all these forms of making indirect or superordinate meanings have

the same basic structure: the mental model of a depicted being, combined with the way it is represented, activates higher level representations through (abductive, associative) inferences. The questions that follow are: what kinds of representations are involved, how are they formed, and what functions do they fulfil? Looking at existing interpretations from a meta-level, we can distinguish between at least the following types of meanings: (a) overarching thematic propositions or questions as in *Citizen Kane*; (b) human traits, problems, virtues or vices (the characters in *Le feu follet* stand for different life plans; super villains for human vices; doppelgangers for disintegrating identity); (c) ideas or processes (the 'tired death' in *Destiny* stands for the inescapability of dying); (d) latent (psychoanalytical) meanings (vampires and monsters in horror films, as well as surrealist characters, stand for repressed sexual wishes or fears, the Alien for uncanny aspects of reproduction); (e) social roles and archetypes (Adam and Eve stand for men and women, Prometheus for the role of the rebel); (f) social groups (the workers and capitalists in Eisenstein's films stand for their classes, Hollywood aliens for enemy invaders or political opponents, Fassbinder's *Maria Braun* for the Germans after the Second World War); (g) mythic or religious characters (Neo in *The Matrix* stands for the Messiah; the hero of *Orfeu Negro* refers to the ancient Orpheus); (h) real individuals (the characters Charlie and Donald Kaufman in *Adaptation* both represent the real-life screenwriter Charlie Kaufman).

These kinds of characters' indirect meanings can have a variety of functions:⁶ they create connections to reality and to the lifeworlds of viewers. They condense complex contexts and abstract thoughts in a vivid way. They express something indirectly when a direct representation would be difficult or ineffective, as in the case of subjective experiential qualities, or taboo subjects. They stimulate associative processes and evoke emotions during reception as well as creation. Memes, especially image macros based on screenshots with text, are evidence of the frequency and creativity with which additional indirect meanings are attributed to characters in everyday life. Here they often stand for other things from the viewers' world of experience. For example, a meme that circulated during the lockdowns in the Covid pandemic, showed the family from Kubrick's *The Shining* with the text insert: 'Having to work from home a few weeks, isolated with the family/heck, what's the worst thing that could happen?' (Munday 2020).

Thus, characters can convey many kinds of higher meanings that serve different functions. The ways in which audiences infer such meanings during reception and the impulses that prompt them to do so also vary. Thus, inferring higher-level meanings may be triggered more by salient textual cues or more by contextual knowledge, and may be based on mental processes as diverse as abstraction, association, reflection or analogical thinking. As already mentioned, forms of generalisation often play a role. Certain characteristics of the being portrayed are generalised, such as Kane's enigmatic nature, for instance, which could be transferred to all humans. In such cases, the character

6 For remarks on the functions of the filmic metaphor, see Whittock 1990: 16–18.

exemplifies the quality in question, demonstrating it in a concrete way.⁷ The symbolic function of a character can also be suggested by the form of a film, for example, by a striking or exaggerated visual representation in animated films (the baby schema shows innocence, a threatening body malice, a salivating tongue desire, dollar signs greed as salient traits). Linguistic expressions or dead metaphors like the 'grim reaper' can be visualised directly. In live-action films, dialogue or editing can also create direct analogies and metaphors (e.g., Eisenstein's cut of Kerensky to a proud peacock in *October*), but many other cases are far more complex and use more subtle correspondences, analogies and similarities. The manner of representation may lead the audience to associate characters not only with other elements from the world of the story, but also from other narrative levels of the same film or from real-life contexts (Thiele 2006: 146). Some higher meanings require knowledge about real entities such as filmmakers or social groups and therefore at the same time concern the character as a symptom (see below).

The ways of conveying indirect meanings also differ depending on which level of meaning they prioritise. In some cases, the audience's attention remains more with the characters as depicted beings, in other cases it shifts more to their symbolic meaning. With personifications such as Lang's 'weary death' (the literal translation of the original German title of *Destiny*, *Der müde Tod*), the indirect meaning can dominate. Characters in contemporary mainstream films, on the other hand, are perceived primarily as represented beings, and their symbolic meanings unfold more subliminally or unobtrusively. Screenwriters give certain hints for this. Robert McKee (1996), for example, advises letting the characters stand for themselves at first and only gradually assigning them symbolic meanings in the course of the story. These meanings should arise from the story itself and not by recourse to externally established, already known symbols. Johann Wolfgang Goethe's theory of literary symbolism (as thematised in several of his works) occupies an intermediate position: here both levels of meaning, the diegetic and the higher, are to be equally activated and mutually illuminate each other (as, for example, in his novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* / *Elective Affinities*). In view of these different weighting possibilities, the widespread assumption that symbolic characters are always one-dimensional must be contradicted (Seger 1990: 175–78).

11.2 Characters in Larger Webs of Meaning

Individual characters and their symbolic meanings are usually positioned in larger structures such as character constellations, story arcs and plots to build more complex webs of meaning. Some possibilities can be derived from David Bordwell's more general reflections on interpretation (1989: 115–28).⁸ First, he argues that characters

⁷ See Nelson Goodman's concept of exemplification (1976: Section II.3); Yacavone 2015: Chapter 5.

⁸ Bordwell addresses Seymour Chatman's Antonioni example, James Kavanagh's *Alien* example, Wolfenstein and Leites's film noir example. See also the various kind of metaphors in film as described in Whittock 1990: Chapter 5.

can contribute to networks of themes: an overarching theme of Antonioni's films—the fragility or 'sickness' of feelings—is linked, for example, to more specific themes and motifs of waning love, problematic communication, escape and distraction. Secondly, character constellations can include graded series of characters and meanings, in film noir, for example, the spectrum from the 'good girl' to the 'good-bad girl' to the truly evil femme fatale. Thirdly, characters can be juxtaposed within constellations and plots in the form of opposites or other relations of meaning: one character stands for life, the other for death; the gunslinger stands for freedom, the marshal for order.⁹ This is not only a question of interpretation, but also anchored in certain conventions of media production, as evidenced by the normative statements of screenwriting guides. For example, Robert McKee emphasises that 'a story is the living proof of an idea, the conversion of idea into action. A story's event structure is the means by which you first express, then prove your idea...without explanation' (McKee 1997: 113). Accordingly, the thematic message of a film (in McKee's words, its 'Controlling Idea') is conveyed by the protagonists standing for a particular value they embody or pursue, while being confronted with opposing values (usually represented by antagonistic characters). The overall message of the story ultimately emerges from which of the conflicting values prevail at the end of the film. Other films, however, deviate significantly from these conventions and develop their higher meanings in a variety of other ways, for example in the form of polysemous allegorical systems. One example is Pino Zac's animated adaptation of Italo Calvino's novel *Il Cavaliere Inesistente/The Nonexistent Knight*. At the centre of this parody of a chivalric film is a knight who is perfect in every respect, but who unfortunately does not exist (indicated by an empty suit of armour). At his side is a man who, according to the film, only exists but does not think. In any case, the interconnectedness, juxtaposition, gradation, and relationality of the meanings of different characters within a film's constellation and plot—or that of a single character undergoing change—make it possible to create rich, complex, and dynamically developing meaning systems.

From a perspective of media history, again, it could be added that certain types of symbolic characters recur in conventional character constellations, arcs and plots. Film forms its own typologies (sometimes connected to genres, such as the Westerner or the gangster), but also draws on established traditions from the visual arts and literature. An example are two literary types distinguished by Werner Wunderlich (1989: 13). On the one hand, these are rebels such as Prometheus, Orpheus, Hagen, and Kohlhaas, who are 'not integrated into the prevailing world order and whose tragic end above all (re)establishes harmony with the prevailing system of ethics, morality, order'. While their tragic conflict with the prevailing order ends with its recognition, they also show that this problematic order needs to be reviewed, perhaps changed. The anti-heroes in gangster films, social problem films, melodramas and in film noir correspond to this

9 Greimas's semiotic square would produce a matrix of possible positions: in *Alien*, Ripley is human, the android non-human, the Alien anti-human, the cat not anti-human. More complex relationships of meaning are also conceivable (see Chapter 10).

pattern. Another type of symbolic figures are the *pícaros*, such as Merlin, Eulenspiegel, and Švejk, who disrupt the existing order through their unconventionality, question prevailing norms and transgress boundaries 'in the form of prohibitions, taboos, laws of nature, spheres of life, conventions, norms, time and space' (ibid.: 14). In doing so, these picaresque protagonists are seemingly inferior to their social environment, but a second glance reveals that they possess superior levels of cleverness, wisdom, empathy, or other abilities. In film, this tradition is continued by comic figures such as Chaplin's Tramp, the Marx Brothers, Forrest Gump, or Miranda July's anti-heroines. Both types of symbolic figures have conflicts with 'society, the divine, nature, the self', which are, however, acted out and resolved in different ways (ibid.: 14).

The higher meanings of characters and their constellations are also subject to more general conventions, as reflected in genres. Thomas Schatz even defines genres by their combination of certain types of characters that embody common values:

The determining, identifying feature of a film genre is ... its community of interrelated character types whose attitudes, values, and actions flesh out dramatic conflicts inherent within that community. The generic community is less a specific place ... than a network of characters, actions, values, and attitudes ... familiar characters performing familiar actions which celebrate familiar values. (Schatz 1981: 24)

While I would not define genres in this way, I find the idea important, that certain types of characters, constellations, and plots convey recurrent patterns of overarching meanings and values and put them up for negotiation in a society. The investigation of such patterns (which could also be based on digital and statistical methods) seems to me to be a worthwhile task for cultural and ideological criticism, discourse analysis, or the history of ideas. On this basis one could examine what kinds of values dominate the stories of a society, for instance, in terms of the moral values according to Moral Foundations Theory (care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity; see Graham et al. 2013) or the 'basic human values' according to Schwartz (2012) (conformity, tradition, security, power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence). However, in all such studies the distinction developed in earlier chapters between (authorially) intended meaning, (communicatively) ideal meaning and the construction of meaning empirically observable in different audience groups would have to be taken into account. Moreover, they would have to consider that not only values are transferred from the storyworld to the world of higher meanings, but also sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination.

In summary, it can be said that characters as symbols can stand for very different things: thematic statements, human virtues or vices, values and problems, abstract ideas and latent desires, social roles and groups, mythical and religious figures, or even real persons. Viewers infer such meanings based on their character models and bodies of knowledge through processes of generalisation, abstraction, analogy, or association. The symbolic functions of characters include the condensation of complex and the concretisation of abstract issues, the circumvention of taboos and the stimulation of the audience's imagination and emotions. In the process, individual characters are often embedded in more complex structures of

meaning, for example, character constellations give rise to thematic networks. On a more general level, such webs of meaning can be conventionalised in media production, for example in the form of recurring character types and constellations in genres. This makes the study of characters as symbols highly relevant for the interpretation of culture, art and media in general. Indirect meanings of characters frequently also refer to extra-filmic contexts in reality, which raises the question of how they relate to the second aspect of interpreting characters: their study as symptoms.

11.3 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions on Characters as Symbols

1. What do the characters stand for, personify or embody as a symbol? Do they convey certain higher meanings through their traits, motives, relationships, conflicts, developments, or artefact qualities?
2. Which of the following types of meanings does the character stand for? Human traits, experiences, problems, vices, or virtues; latent or repressed desires (such as psychoanalytic ones); general ideas or ideologemes; natural forces or processes; social roles or groups; popular, mythical, or religious characters or archetypes; the filmmakers themselves, public figures or other real people?
3. Does the character convey overarching thematic questions, messages or ideas, or a web of different themes?
4. How salient are the character's higher meanings: are they obviously foregrounded, or are they conveyed more casually and subliminally? Is the character primarily defined by a narrow set of symbolic features or does it exhibit a variety of individual characteristics, only some of which refer to higher meanings?
5. Does the character correspond to a traditional type of symbol, personification or allegory anchored in history, or does it create new meanings?
6. How do the symbolisms the individual characters relate to each other? Are the meanings of several characters counterpointed, paralleled, contrasted or graded? Do any characters represent variations of a common theme or stand in contrast to one another?
7. How are the individual characters of a constellation integrated into the film's web of meaning as a whole, what contribution do they each make to it?
8. What are the connections of the symbolism of the characters to their symptomatology? What role do their overarching meanings play in production and reception and vice versa?

12. Characters as Symptoms: How Characters Interact with Reality

The study of characters as symbols and as symptoms is closely related, but one should not confuse the two. When interpreting characters as symbols, one tries to find out *what* meanings they stand for. When interpreting them as symptoms, on the other hand, one either tries to find out *why* they have certain qualities and meanings (as a represented being, artefact and symbol) or *how* they affect certain viewers, communities or cultures, sometimes long after they have been received. So, the focus here is ultimately on their causal relationships with extratextual, sociocultural reality. Characters are connected to reality in different ways, they emerge from it and feed back into it. Their creation and reception are based on experiences with real beings, they indicate how their creators perceive other people, and they can change the viewers' relationships to themselves and others.

From a semiotic point of view, then, symbolism belongs to semantics and concerns meaning, while symptomatology belongs to pragmatics and concerns the social use of signs. (Abstract meanings can have certain effects insofar as they are part of the content of thoughts and intentions that lead filmmakers to shape the character in certain ways or prompt recipients to behave in certain ways.) The practices of constructing and reconstructing meaning in the creation and reception of characters (or in 'encoding' and 'decoding' according to Hall 2003) are embedded in a larger web of causal factors that shape these practices as well as the effects they produce. These factors and effects include, but are not limited to, the intentions, interests, dispositions and situations of creators and audiences, their social interactions, relationships and group affiliations, and their broader sociocultural contexts (ideological, discursive, normative, legal, political, or affective). The interpretation of characters as symbols is therefore interwoven with causal analyses and empirical questions that need to consider the complex interplay of various factors across multiple practices and processes, including indirect, transactional and cumulative causes and effects, subjective motives, and socially emergent phenomena.

In communication studies and media psychology, such complexities are often discussed under the label of 'parasocial interaction', but as stated before, I consider it unsuitable and misleading. The term 'parasocial' obscures the essential differences between characters and persons, especially the mediality of characters, and 'interaction'

ignores the specificity and variety of involvement with characters (see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14). Moreover, the whole expression is limited to the recipient perspective and thus marginalises both the creation of characters and their specific qualities as objects of analysis and interpretation, which are the focus of this book.

The focus on the characters themselves is better matched by understanding them as *symptoms*. However, the term 'symptom' has its own difficulties and needs explanation. In medicine, 'symptom' means a perceptible sign of an illness; in psychoanalysis, a manifestation of unconscious desires, usually of a psychopathological kind. Bordwell's 'symptomatic meaning' alludes to this pathological sense. In contrast, when I speak of characters as symptoms, I use the term in its most general meaning: audiences and analysts can perceive characters as signs or indicators of things with which they are causally linked. On the one hand, characters suggest conclusions about the causes of their creation, which are expressed in hypotheses of the following kind: 'The character is like this because the director wanted to express her own experiences' or 'The character has these traits because of the contemporary image of women'. When we speak of the causes of characters in the following, we mean such explanations of their genesis by referring to individual or collective, external or internal, causal or mental factors in their creation. Secondly, characters enable hypotheses about their effects on audiences as well as on wider sociocultural contexts, such as 'The character's behaviour was often imitated', 'The character will corrupt morals', or 'The character was alluded to again and again in later works'. The concept of a symptom indicates the two-sided nature of this causal relationship: as elements of sociocultural contexts, characters form a link between production and reception, between communicative causes and effects.

The Nazi film *Jud Süß* (Figure 42) is a drastic example that illustrates this. As a symbol, the protagonist Süß Oppenheimer is intended to represent Jews in general and assign them negative characteristics such as greed, treachery, and sexual aggressiveness. If one examines the character as a symptom, these traits and their symbolic function can be traced back to a range of interconnected causal factors, including the murderous intentions of the leading executive producer, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, the opportunism of director Veit Harlan, the function of so-called *Staatsauftragsfilmen* ('state commissioned films') in the context of the Nazis' persecution of Jews, or more general contexts of German anti-Semitism. Moreover, one can ask what effects the Süß character had on various audiences and society, for example on the population of Nazi Germany, where the film was used to prepare for further antisemitic mass murder, on the concentration camp guards to whom the film was shown (survivors report brutal mistreatment after the screening), on Jewish teenagers like Ralph Giordano, who watched the film together with a German friend, on whom the film had the intended effect, or on filmmakers and critics like the young Michelangelo Antonioni who praised the film (in the newspaper *Corriere Padano*, 6 September 1940).

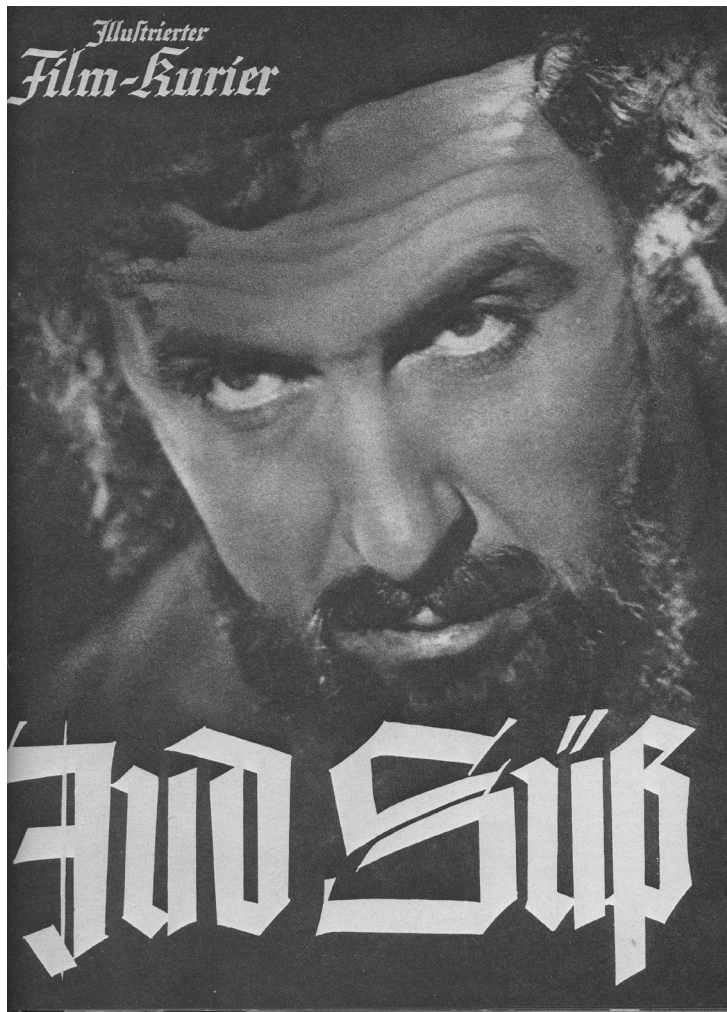


Fig. 42 The theatre programme for Harlan's antisemitic hate film *Jud Süß* shows Ferdinand Marian in the title role, portrayed as a demonic villain. (Dir. Veit Harlan, *Jud Süß*, Terra Film, 1940, Germany. All rights reserved.)

Also in less extreme cases, the consideration of characters as symptoms is often closely linked to historical reconstruction, political reflection, moral evaluation, and ideological or cultural critique. It often concerns questions of social representation, the discrimination of social minorities, or the exaltation of dominant groups. The symptom metaphor can be taken further by considering typical groups of characters as a *syndrome* (a collection of symptoms) in the context of more general cultural diagnoses. A famous example of this is Siegfried Kracauer's description of the path 'from Caligari to Hitler' in German history (2004). Kracauer attributed the conspicuous accumulation of diabolical, tyrannical, power-hungry characters in the cinema of the Weimar Republic—such as Caligari, Mabuse, and Nosferatu—to the unconscious

of filmmakers and their audiences, which, according to him, revolved around the seemingly inevitable choice between tyranny and chaos, indicating and ultimately preparing the support of Hitler.

When interpreting characters as symptoms, a variety of approaches are used, including biographical (What do the characters tell us about the filmmakers and their intentions?), sociological (What do the characters reveal about society? What effects do they have on the audience?), historical (What do the characters indicate about the production and reception context at the time the film was made?), psychological (What do the characters suggest about the psyche of the filmmakers or viewers?), or intertextual (What do the characters convey about other characters, media texts, genres and their development?). More specific concepts and methods can be used to flesh out these approaches. For example, a sociological approach may draw on Marxism or gender studies (What do the characters reveal about economic inequality or gender roles?); a psychological approach may draw on psychoanalysis or empirical mainstream psychology (What do the characters reveal about the unconscious desires and fears of filmmakers and viewers, or about their conscious attitudes and values?). The results of such interpretations often lead to heated discussions. In the following, the main aim is to reveal their implicit premises and thus make the argumentation for or against certain positions more transparent.

Ultimately, all interpretations of characters as symptoms can be traced back to three fundamental questions: What individual and sociocultural factors on the part of filmmakers and viewers can be seen as causes of the character's intended and empirical reception? What impact might the character have on individual viewers, specific audiences, or society? And which of these causes and effects are noticed and grasped by the spectators in the empirical, intended, and ideal reception? The main differences between the various interpretive approaches lie in how they answer these questions and what kinds of causes in production and what kinds of effects in reception they consider most important. Some interpretations also group the three questions together and assume from the outset that the represented being has certain qualities, that these qualities convey certain meanings, that the filmmakers wanted to convey these meanings, that the audience comprehends and accepts them, and that it reacts to them as intended. Such simplifying short-cuts thus do not distinguish between characters as represented beings, symbols, and symptoms, nor between the meaning, production, and reception of characters. But this is actually wrong and often misleading (see Part I of this book).

A further necessary step is therefore to clarify the reception-theoretical preconditions of interpreting characters as symptoms. In his approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, Teun van Dijk (1997) offers convincing contributions to this. According to van Dijk, cognitive theories of communication have yet neglected the social and evaluative dimensions of mental models. Moreover, they have neglected the fact that communication participants—such as filmmakers and viewers—not only

form mental models of the situations and characters represented in a text, but also models of the communicative context in which they themselves are embedded. They 'not only form or update models of events or situations they communicate about, but also of the communicative event in which they participate' (van Dijk 1997: 193). Van Dijk speaks of 'context models of discourse' here. Such context models are mental representations of someone's own communicative situation and its general conditions. They may contain ideas concerning the following major categories:

Setting: location, timing of communicative event;

Social circumstances: previous acts, social situation;

Institutional environment;

Overall goals of the (inter)action;

Participants and their social and speaking roles;

Current (situational) relations between participants;

Global (non-situational) relations between participants;

Group membership or categories of participants (e.g., gender, age). (van Dijk 1997: 193)

Moreover, context models include representations of the text and its features (such as narrative structure, rhetoric, or style), and they are linked to group-specific opinions and socially shared representations (*ibid.*: 196). On this basis, context models serve the pragmatic handling of communication and help communication partners to comprehend and regulate relationships between explicit information and implicit complements, concrete details and abstract themes, as well as content or meaning and how it is conveyed through specific forms of expression, style, and rhetoric (*ibid.*: 198-99).

Van Dijk's considerations focus on linguistic communication in oral or written form, but can be transferred to cinematic communication and other media with some modifications. This may also lead to some relevant additions. Van Dijk's 'contextual models' also seem to include what has been variously referred to in media studies as a media 'apparatus', 'dispositif', 'actor network', or 'assemblage', i.e., a system of interconnected media technologies, spaces, organisations, roles, rules, practices, processes and conventions that together produce a particular niche and form of communication (Hickethier 2003; Larroche 2019). For example, the cinema system would include film technologies, theatres, production and distribution companies, social roles and practices of filmmakers and audiences, film genres and conventions, and other elements. The literary system would include print technologies and materials, spaces of reading (such as libraries or living rooms), publishers, roles, and practices of authors and their readership, literary genres and conventions, and other elements. Such general systems form the basis for specific communicative situations in which their elements take on a particular form and constellation, such as watching a

Douglas Sirk melodrama in a provincial American cinema palace in the 1950s, dancing together in front of the TV to a Bollywood film in a Mumbai living room in the 1990s, or reading an experimental short story on an eBook in a Berlin S-Bahn in the 2020s. And in all these specific cases, the audience will often imagine and reflect on some of the conditions and elements of the situation they find themselves in. Conversely, filmmakers or literary authors will also often think about the production process and their audience.

That filmmakers and viewers develop ideas about each other and the situation of cinematic communication is perhaps less obvious than in linguistic communication, but such ideas nevertheless play an important role. Recent work on the pragmatics of film has clearly shown the importance of assumptions about 'communicative contracts' between filmmakers and audiences, about the type of film (art or entertainment, documentary or fictional?), about genre rules, expected gratifications and effects, or codes of emotionality and authenticity (e.g., Casetti 2002).¹ A clear indication of this is that after watching a film, viewers often discuss its directors, stars or possible social consequences at length. This metacommunication in the cinema, at home, in blogs or fan forums does not arise *ex nihilo* after the end of the film, but already during the selection and viewing of a film, viewers form context models about the causes, conditions and consequences of what they (will) see—and thus also about the communicative causes and effects of characters.

The analysis of characters as symptoms of communicative causes and effects can pursue different goals. On the one hand, the analysis can aim to reconstruct the actual context models of certain audience groups. On the other hand, it can aim to develop own context models that are as well-founded as possible (according to communicative rules and available information) and thereby find out something new about the relations of a character to real production and reception contexts. Take, for example, the protagonists played by Hollywood star Rock Hudson in romantic comedies between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. Since these main characters were supposed to come across as ideals of heterosexual masculinity, and since homosexuality was socially discriminated, Hudson, his agency and his studio tried to hide the fact that he was gay. Nevertheless, rumours spread time and again. One question of analysis could now be whether gay fans of Hudson believed such rumours more than heterosexual female fans, and to what extent they therefore experienced his characters differently. Alternatively, an analysis could also examine if and how these characters played by Rock Hudson actually show certain signs of the actor's homosexuality, or act out 'sexual heterodoxy' (Jeffers McDonald 2006). The analysis of characters as symptoms can thus be geared directly toward their communicative causes and effects in reality or toward viewers' ideas about these causes and effects. As we will see, various aspects can be considered in both cases.

1 See also Casetti (2001) and Tröhler (2002).

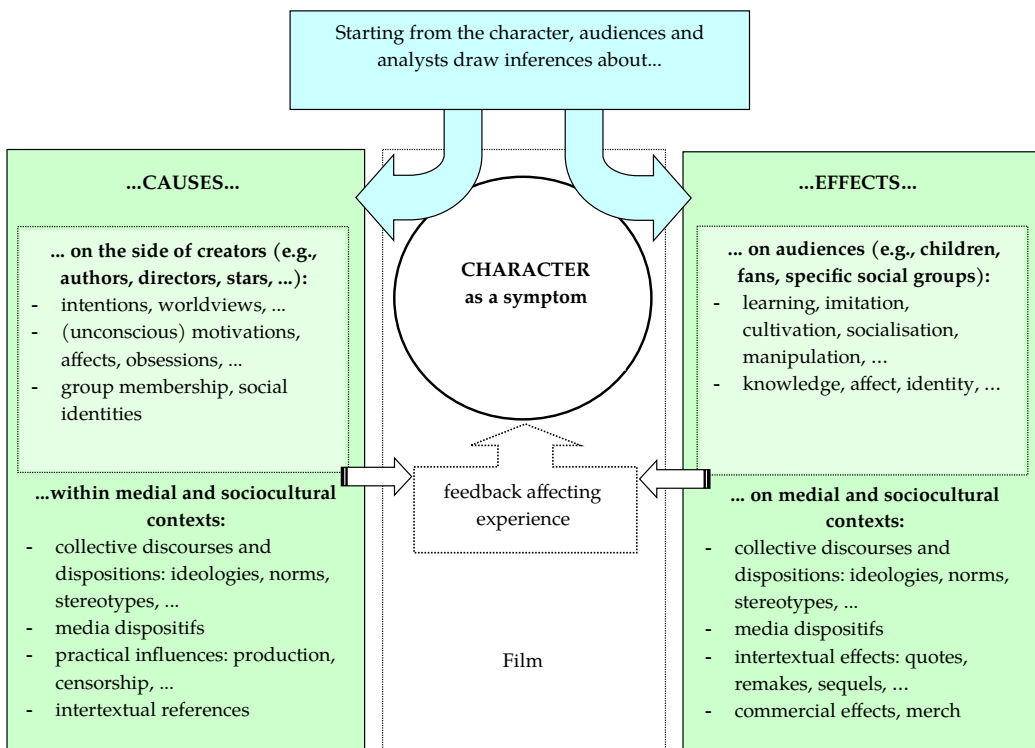


Diagram 26 The character as a symptom indicating causes and effects in extratextual reality

Diagram 26 illustrates this in an overview to be briefly explained. The analysis of characters as symptoms first presupposes that certain qualities of a character are grasped: physical, psychological, or social traits of the character as a represented being, forms of presentation of the character as an artefact or overarching meanings of the character as a symbol. On this basis, viewers and film analysts can draw inferences in two directions: about the causes of these different qualities in production, media dispositifs (frameworks) and sociocultural contexts (left side of the graph) or about their effects on specific recipients, audience groups, media structures and society (right side of the graph). These causes or effects can be both individual and collective and involve human actors or non-human factors. Thus, the characteristics of the character can be attributed to individual filmmakers, but also to the production circumstances or sociocultural contexts that influence them, and the effects of a character can be examined in terms of individual audiences, larger audiences, the media landscape, culture, or society. In each of these cases, inferences from the character to its causes and effects are also based on the social and media dispositions of the analysers, especially their communicative competence and knowledge. If symptomatic inferences are made about the causes and effects of the character, they in turn often feed back into the understanding and experience of the character as a represented being, artefact and symbol. The following paragraphs first turn to the causes of characters, then to their effects.

12.1 The Causes of Characters

What causes contribute to the creation and design of a character? Creating characters is a complex process that—at least in film—involves very different causal factors (as described also in some of the former chapters). These include the personality traits and motives of all those involved (scriptwriters, directors, actors, and other members of the film team), elements and structures of the media system (institutions, technology, economics, regulation, conventions) as well as larger sociocultural contexts (discourses, ideologies, mentalities, emotional cultures, social groups, and conflicts). In principle, factors from each of these areas can contribute to the qualities of a character. Auteurist, intentionalist, or biographical approaches to interpretation focus on the conscious intentions and intuitive creativity of individuals as major causes, especially when a character appears as an alter ego or mouthpiece of auteurs who dominate the production process. In this view, for example, the self-destructive aggression and loneliness of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* was attributed to the motives and worldviews of screenwriter Paul Schrader, director Martin Scorsese or actor Robert de Niro, as all three claimed to have experienced similar feelings to Bickle.² Or it has been pointed out that François Truffaut gave his character Antoine Doinel many features of his own biography. Deliberate intentions of filmmakers are also evident in autobiographical documentaries such as *Waltz with Bashir* or *Yellow Fever* (see Chapter 4), or in propaganda and educational films that instrumentalise characters in terms of ideological characteristics or didactic functions. In contrast, the features of other characters are often also read as symptoms of unconscious, involuntary dispositions, drives, or obsessions on the part of the filmmakers. For example, the main female characters in Hitchcock's films—icy blondes with subliminal erotic charm—have often been associated with the director's obsession with this type of woman, their audiovisual appearance with his fetishism, and their suffering in the story with his sadism.

Additionally or alternatively, qualities of a character can be traced back to the media system or 'dispositif', including the circumstances of film production. Of the many technical, economic, legal, and practical parameters mentioned in approaches ranging from film history to discourse analysis, only a few that are particularly prevalent can be mentioned here. In the area of technical factors, for example, discussions of special effects hold a great fascination for film fans, such as how the transformations of the killer robots in *Terminator 2* were realised. Or, the unintentionally comical appearance of a monster in a horror film could be attributed to technical mistakes, and these in turn could be seen as the result of a low budget. The ambiguous behaviour of lovers in Hollywood films from the 1930s to 1960s could be explained by the constraints of the

2 See Laurent Bouzereau's documentary *Making Taxi Driver* on the collector's edition DVD (2002). The patterns of folk-psychological behavioural explanations as described by Bertram Malle (2007) apply here.

Production Code, or hidden political criticism in dialogue as an attempt to circumvent censorship in totalitarian regimes. Some characters are clearly structured according to conventions of storytelling, often in specific genres. Others refer more or less directly to intertextual or real-life models. For example, many characters in *Pulp Fiction* allude to roles their actors have played in the past. Political films sometimes let the real object of their critique shine through, such as Bill Clinton in *Primary Colors*. The most obvious examples are characters in biopics (Taylor 2002), cameo appearances of stars, or characters whose names refer to real people (as with Charlie Kaufman in *Adaptation*). Many characters also refer to several real and intertextual models at the same time. For example, the outward appearance of the title character in Tex Avery's *Red Hot Riding Hood* is based on both the fairy tale Little Red Riding Hood and pinup star Betty Grable, her singing voice on that of Judy Garland and her speaking voice on that of Katherine Hepburn (Figure 43). The animated pinup character was aimed at, among others, a GI audience in the Second World War, reappeared in later Avery cartoons and was censored more than once. Besides, the Big Bad Wolf flirts with her like a stereotypical Frenchman. In such cases, both the symbolic and symptomatic levels of a character, its meanings and its causes, are involved and intertwined.

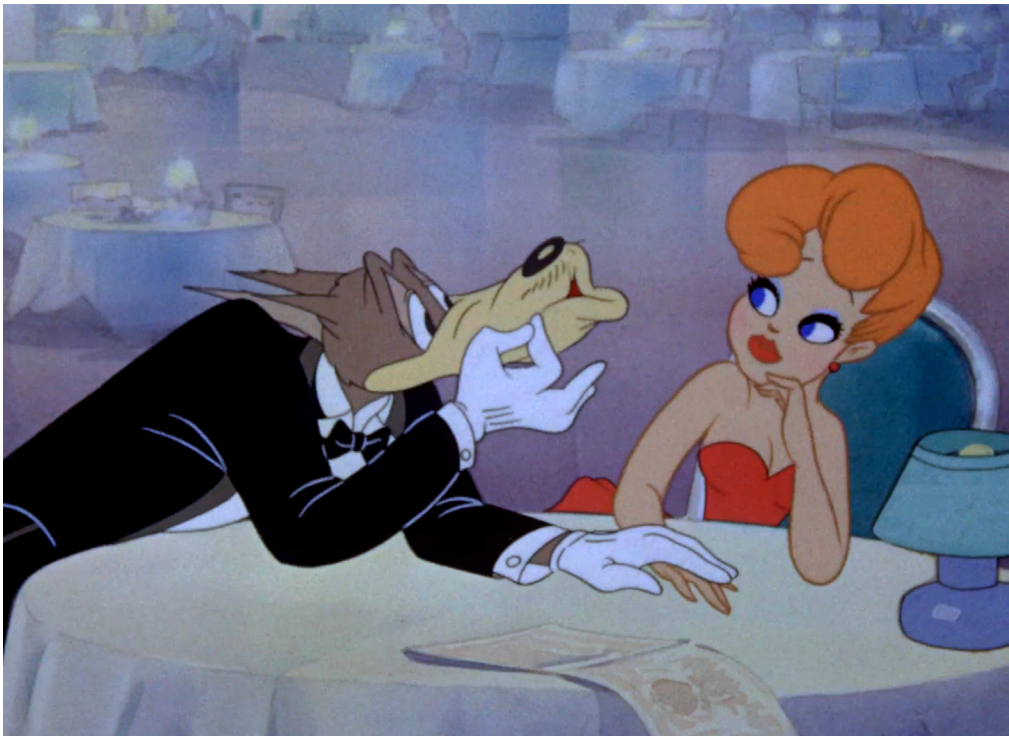


Fig. 43 Many characters refer to real or intertextual models, often several at once, such as the title character of Tex Avery's *Red Hot Riding Hood*. Her suitor, the Big Bad Wolf, flirts like a stereotypical Frenchman. (Dir. Tex Avery, *Red Hot Riding Hood*, 1943, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, USA. All rights reserved.)

Causes for a character's qualities as a represented being, artefact and symbol can also be located in more general sociocultural contexts. A wide range of concepts are used to discuss such collective backgrounds and factors. Some concern mental dispositions that are widely shared in a culture, including ideologies, mentalities, stereotypes, clichés, concepts of human nature, horizons of understanding, emotional cultures, or structures of feeling (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 5). Others refer to more institutionalised or objective social structures such as political or social systems, laws, codes, or discourses. Such sociocultural structures are thought to shape both media systems and artists' decisions about their characters. Accordingly, the essential cause for the construction of the character can alternatively be seen in the creative intention of the individual, in the media system, or in the sociocultural background, and characters can be analysed as indicators of such sociocultural contexts—for example, as signs of sexism, racism, or neoliberalism. As the creation of characters involves such a complex network of factors, a variety of explanations for character qualities are often combined in analysis. Looking at the character of Charles Foster Kane, one could conclude that a combination of individual and collective causes were involved: motives of the actor and director, Orson Welles, or the screenwriter, Herman Mankiewicz; the unusual amount of artistic freedom that the studio allowed Welles; the intertextual inspiration of Aldous Huxley's novel *After Many a Summer* (1939); the millionaires William Randolph Hearst and Howard Hughes as real-life models; or political discourses and images of masculinity at the time of production. To what causes the qualities of characters are attributed often has a significant impact on the moral, political, or ideological evaluation not only of the characters themselves, but also of the entire work, its creators. To what causes the qualities of characters are attributed often has a significant impact on the moral, political, or ideological evaluation not only of the characters themselves, but also of the work as a whole, its creators, and the media system and culture within which they operate. A striking example of this are changing representational practices such as racist black, red or yellowfacing as opposed to, say, diversity-sensitive or colourblind casting.

12.2 The Uses and Effects of Characters

How do characters have effects, and what kinds of effects to they have? These questions are of great importance for various fields of practice: media production and regulation, psychology and psychotherapy, strategic communication in political, humanitarian or commercial contexts, criticism of social stereotyping, ideology or propaganda, as well as academic disciplines including media, literature and communication studies, cultural studies, and sociology. A wide range of approaches in these fields examine characters as behavioural models, cautionary examples, empathy trainers, identification devices, stand-ins for vicarious experiences, parasocial interaction partners, fictional friends, opinion leaders, and objects of fear, desire, or veneration. They examine characters'

cognitive, affective, behavioural, and social effects on individual recipients, specific audience groups or entire cultures and societies, implying different theoretical models. So far, there is no systematic overview of these heterogeneous approaches, which once again hardly exchange with each other. In the following, I will briefly outline some central lines of research, primarily to show their relevance for the analysis and interpretation of characters as well as their possible connections. Because the following was only developed as a sketch in the original version of this book, additional recent literature is included here. More about my own position on the social impact of audiovisual media can be found in some publications that appeared after the first edition of this book (e.g., Eder 2023a).

As a starting point, we can ask which general findings on media effects can be applied to characters. Janet Staiger identifies four overarching, dominant hypotheses in media effects research (2005: 18): as instances of *mediation*, media shape their users' access to the social world through individual negotiation processes. Media also contribute to forms of *education*; they trigger cultural learning processes, acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also frustration. Through *reinforcement*, they may support the existing social order; and as instruments of *power*, they can manipulate their audience. Research on the cultural impacts of art rather points to effects on empathetic connection, intellectual inspiration, creative stimulation, aesthetic growth, sense of belonging, and social bridging or bonding (Carnwath and Brown 2014). Skip Dine Young summarises psychological research on the effects of films, including aggressive and sexual behaviour, substance use, psychiatric disturbances, imagination, attitudes, stereotypes, ideologies, as well as their uses in professional training, science communication, psychotherapy, identity, and self-understanding (Young 2012: 131–69). In 1933, the sociologist Herbert Blumer published his well-known work on the effects of cinema on viewers, amazingly still the most comprehensive qualitative study on the subject to date. Even though new research is urgently needed, Blumer's results remain interesting and partly coincide with more recent and specific findings (see below). He summarises them as follows:

We have indicated the great influence of motion pictures on the play of children. We have shown that motion pictures serve as a source for considerable imitation. Forms of beautification, mannerisms, poses, ways of courtship, and ways of love-making, especially, are copied. We have shown the influence of motion pictures on fantasy and day-dreaming. We have treated at some length the ways in which motion pictures may influence the emotions of the spectators, showing in particular how they may arouse terror and fright in children, sorrow and pathos among people in general, excitement and passions of love chiefly among adolescents. We have indicated how motion pictures provide people with schemes of life, fixed images, and stereotyped conceptions of different characters and modes of conduct. We have called attention to the way in which motion pictures may furnish people with ideas as to how they should act, notions of their rights and privileges, and conceptions of what they would like to enjoy. We have indicated, finally, how motion pictures may implant attitudes. (Blumer 1933: 193)

Many of those findings on the effects of films or other media in general can be applied also more specifically to their characters. Beyond such broad directions of possible influences, however, current research shows that media actually have very different kinds of effects: individual and collective, strong and weak, short-term and long-term.³ Moreover, many of these effects develop in cumulative, indirect and transactional ways (Valkenburg et al. 2016). For example, while it may be important how viewers or readers react to a particular character during reception, it may be even more important how they use and relate to the character in subsequent interactions, for example in discussions after a screening or in larger social debates. Moreover, it may be important that a sequence of similar characters in films or other media together influences recipients and their interactions over time. Accordingly, most current theories no longer make a blanket assumption of weak or strong media effects, but speak of *selective* effects (Leffelsend, Mauch, and Hanover 2004), meaning that some of them 'influence certain recipients under certain conditions and at certain times' (Brosius 2003: 133). This also applies to characters: their effects are complex and result from multifactorial dynamics of reception, interaction, and appropriation in specific contexts. Therefore, empirical studies on the effects of characters (e.g., on their influence on pro- and anti-social behaviour) should avoid sweeping generalisations, because it often depends on the individual case. This is another reason why the precise analysis of individual characters and their constellations is an important and necessary complement to empirical media effects research.

When we try to model the pathways of characters' effects in more detail and precision, it soon becomes clear that we are dealing with a range of processes and practices that build on, but often go beyond, character reception (or what others have called 'parasocial interaction').⁴ Although there are again various competing answers to the question of how characters have effects, many seem to be broadly compatible.

1. Pleasure, fantasy, mind-reading, and vicarious experience: to start with the most basic, watching characters is generally pleasurable in various ways. Characters offer experiences of beauty, insight, entertainment, stimulation, recognition, empathy, or comfort. Alan Palmer (2004) and Lisa Zunshine (2006) attribute our enjoyment of novels, movies, and other narratives largely to the fact that they open up a safe space in which we can playfully test our abilities to read other people's minds. Further pleasures that characters provide are based on fantasy, simulation, or vicarious experience. Human everyday life is deeply permeated by imaginings, daydreams, wishful fantasies, and future scenarios that influence behaviour in many ways. In such processes, characters can play important roles. As Ien Ang puts it, fantasy and fiction

3 Overviews can be found in Staiger 2005; Bonfadelli 2004; Jäckel 2002; Brosius 2003; Leffelsend, Mauch, and Hannover 2004. My own view on the question of how films can have political impact is set out in Eder 2023b.

4 The concept of parasocial interaction is discussed in Gleich 1997; Giles 2002; Hartmann, Schramm, and Klimmt 2004.

'offer a private and unconstrained space in which socially impossible or unacceptable subject positions, or those which are in some way too dangerous or too risky to be acted out in real life, can be adopted' (Ang 1996: 80). According to Ang, for example, female viewers' responses to the series *Dallas* show that protagonists such as Sue Ellen Ewing should be understood 'as embodying versions of gendered subjectivity endowed with specific forms of psychical and emotional satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and specific ways of dealing with conflicts and dilemmas' and thus as 'symbolic realizations of feminine subject positions with which viewers can identify in fantasy' (ibid.: 78). Sharing characters' experiences can also provide vicarious satisfaction of the viewers' own wishes. Richard Dyer (1977) points out that viewers often turn to stars and characters that personify abundance, energy, intensity, openness, and community in order to compensate contrary feelings in their own everyday lives, including feelings of lack, exhaustion, dreariness, fragmentation, and manipulation. Jackie Stacey (1992) has empirically investigated associated desires and fantasies of British women and their connection with the imitation of stars, including through consumer behaviour. Consequently, advertising also makes use of characters to promise viewers satisfaction of their desires through the advertised product. Such fantasies and vicarious satisfactions may sedate audiences, stabilise the prevailing social order and hinder the rational, targeted processing of social problems and injustices, but they can also keep alive ideas of a better life. Moreover, escapist fantasy pleasures and vicarious wish fulfilment are by no means the only effects of characters; other theories emphasise precisely their role in social learning processes.

2. Observational learning: various theoretical approaches start from the general idea that people learn behavioural tendencies, norms and skills primarily by observing others, including characters in the media, and consciously or unconsciously adopting them as behavioural models. Building on the pioneering work of Albert Bandura and his social cognitive learning theory, such processes and their effects are studied in social psychology under terms such as observational learning, model learning or modelling (Bandura 1975). While older research often focused on modelling aggressive behaviour, many recent studies suggest that 'prosocial modelling' of altruistic actions also has significant effects on users and that characters can promote socially desirable behaviour (Greitemeyer 2022). Moreover, there are ways of learning from characters that have not yet been thoroughly explored in the social psychological literature. For example, the arguments in this book so far have shown that characters are not only perceived as represented beings, but also as artefacts, symbols, and symptoms. Viewers and readers often reflect on how characters are created and used, and they can acquire media knowledge and competence in this way. Observational learning is thus an open concept. Characters can be used as vivid behavioural models in various contexts, from consuming entertainment to parents' interactions with their children to various levels of education in schools, universities, or professions such as medicine or law (see below). Such uses can be the basis for different forms of influence, such as

pro- or anti-social, preconscious or reflected, specific or general, situationally limited or cumulative learning processes, which can also play a role in some of the following forms of character effects.

3. Narrative effects, including narrative persuasion: other empirical work focuses less on the observation of individual characters and more on the essential contribution that characters and their interactions make to the impact of entire narratives, especially to their persuasive effect regarding certain messages and beliefs in education or propaganda (e.g., Nabi and Green 2015). Some assume that recipients ‘identify’ with the protagonists of the story, i.e., experience the events from their perspective, others assume more generally that recipients react with various kinds of emotions to characters and their experiences and actions (see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14). The affective involvement with characters, in turn, makes it more likely that recipients adopt messages of the narrative that they would reject or resist if they were conveyed in non-narrative form (Slater and Rouner 2002). However, narratives fulfil many other social functions and have ethical consequences far beyond persuasion (for an overview, see Moss-Wellington 2019: Chapter 2). We can assume that the engagement with characters has significant effects in all those narrative contexts (some arguments for that can be found in Plantinga 2018a).

4. Entertainment-Education and moral learning: based on findings about observational learning and narrative persuasion, a whole strand of communication research called Entertainment-Education investigates how entertaining media narratives and their characters can be systematically used to impart prosocial values and guide audiences in areas such as health, human rights, or social relationships. The Entertainment-Education approach has been implemented in many media productions, predominantly in television. The work of Mexican TV producer Miguel Sabido has been particularly influential. The following quote instructively summarises the narrative strategy in his telenovelas, which focuses on character constellations and character arcs (see Chapter 10):

Each of Sabido’s entertainment-educational soap opera[!] begins with three sets of characters: 1) those who support the value (positive role models) 2) those who reject the value (negative role models), and 3) those who are somewhere in-between (the doubters). Each soap opera has at least four positive role models and four negative counterparts: A character who approves of the value and one who disapproves, one who promotes the value and one who does not, one who exercises the value and one who does not, and one who socially validates the value and one who does not. In addition, there are at least three doubters, who represent various demographic groups within the target audience. One of the doubters adopts the value about one-third of the way through the soap opera, the second adopts the value about two-thirds of the way, and the third doubter keeps doubting all the way through the soap opera and is seriously punished (often killed) toward the end of the soap opera. When the first and the second doubters gradually change their attitudes and behaviors toward the value, their transformation is

reinforced and explained in the epilogues. The epilogue is in essence a 30 to 40 second 'advertising spot' for the educational content of the soap opera, usually delivered by a highly-respected national figure, who relates the content of that episode with the daily lives of audience members. Each time a positive role model or a doubter performs a socially desirable behavior, they are rewarded immediately. Each time a negative role model performs a socially undesirable behavior (relative to the value that is being promoted), he/she is immediately punished. (Singhal et al. 1993: 4f.)

The Entertainment-Education approach recalls certain older normative poetics of literature and drama that focus on moral education (see Chapter 2). Friedrich Schiller's essay 'The Theatre Considered as a Moral Institution', for example, posited as early as 1784, that theatre should instruct the audience morally by evoking emotions through characters' virtues, vices, and fates. Questions of moral learning through characters are also a part of various other, more recent theories. For instance, philosopher Noël Carroll claims that works of 'mass art' can contribute to the clarification of common moral ideas through concrete and vivid examples in which a selective moral endorsement of characters takes place (1998a: 319–42). Other authors discuss the question if media can be useful and effective in training real-world perspective-taking, empathy and altruism. Summarising interdisciplinary findings on empathy and literature, Suzanne Keen (2007) comes to rather sceptical conclusions in this respect. However, the debate about the influence of characters on moral, prosocial, empathetic, or altruistic behaviour remains open. The rather cautious positions of Carroll and Keen are counterbalanced by the above-mentioned findings that prosocial modelling and Entertainment-Education often do indeed influence viewers. Later, these viewers can themselves function as behavioural models for other people who have not seen the film or programme, which can lead to broader social resonance.

5. Imitation and veneration: as fantasy objects, behavioural models, narrative persuaders or entertaining educators, characters can trigger implicit learning processes (see below), but also conscious acts of imitation or veneration, ranging from the prosocial to the antisocial, from the mundane to the religious, and from 'horizontal' imitation of characters perceived as similar to 'vertical' imitation of characters perceived as superior (Domaradzki 2021: 2).⁵ Much of the research focuses on violent behaviour, including dangerous driving, self-injury, suicide, physical assault, or even murder. That characters' suicides may contribute to recipients taking their own lives has been called the 'Werther effect', after Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). Meta-analyses list empirical evidence for that, but also for the opposite 'Papageno effect' of characters steering people away from suicidal acts (Domaradzki 2021). Copycat crimes and murders triggered by films such as *A Clockwork Orange* or *Natural Born Killers* are also empirically documented, but the films seem to be only minor factors in these violent events (Young 2012: 135). Most forms of imitating characters

5 Regarding viewers' relationships with stars, Richard Dyer—citing Andrew Tudor—distinguishes between emotional proximity, identification, imitation, and projection (Dyer 1999: 17–18).

are more commonplace and harmless. For example, many viewers copy the clothing, hair style, make-up, mannerisms, or ways of moving and talking of favoured characters (Blumer 1933) (Figure 40). This can take the form of elaborate role-playing as in cosplay (costume play), which is a widespread phenomenon in fan cultures, where fans dress up like their heroes. Usually, that involves pleasurable experiences of playful recreation and self-efficacy, but in extreme cases, a fan's entire life can be oriented toward a character, celebrity, or star (Hartmann 2016: 138f.). Turning to non-fictional personae, Bishnupriya Ghosh (2011) has examined in detail how 'global icons' such as Mother Theresa or Phoolan Devi, who appear in both factual and mythical narratives, become affective objects of vernacular veneration, sometimes with political consequences.

6. Influence on real-life relationships: the above already suggests that characters influence real-life interactions and relationships in many ways. As behavioural models in 'imagined interactions', characters are used for mental training and preparation for encounters in everyday and professional life (Madison, Porter, and Greule 2015: 261). They can also stimulate human interaction as its occasion and object, for instance, when members of fan cultures discuss their favourite characters or imitate them in collective playacting. Characters can also sometimes compensate for loneliness and lack of social contact ('parasocial compensation hypothesis'; see Madison, Porter, and Greule 2015). A review of empirical studies suggests that 'parasocial relationships appear to be able to at least partly satisfy a thwarted need to belong', as they 'can provide social support, and, thus, shield against or diminish the effects of social exclusion and loneliness' (Hartmann 2016: 137). From this does not necessarily follow that characters regularly serve as substitutes for real people and displace real social contacts; there seems to be not much evidence for that. However, engaging with media characters still takes up time that cannot be used for interactions with real others (excessive media consumption is a common point of contention in families). In addition to stimulating or diminishing real interactions and relationships in certain contexts, characters also influence their content and forms. As mentioned above, this includes Entertainment-Education and moral learning, but also, for example, pornography and other forms of parasocial sexuality, which have far-reaching effects on sexual norms and behaviour in the lifeworld. Finally, all the following effects characters have on their viewers—socialisation, stereotyping, identity formation, political instrumentalisation, and media education—also impact their social relationships with real others.

7. Cultivation, stereotyping, and (anti-)discrimination: while individual texts can sometimes directly cause attitudinal and behavioural changes in the audience, media effects are more often the result of cumulative, gradual processes that slowly shape collective affect structures, 'imagined communities' (Anderson 2006), or 'social imaginaries' (Taylor 2004). Such processes include social learning, cultivation, nudging, priming, framing, agenda setting, or memory conditioning (e.g., see Brosius 2003: 136–40; Staiger 2005: Chapter 8). Accordingly, audiences are significantly influenced by the repetition of similar types of characters they encounter again and again in many texts

over a long period of time. Some consequences of this have been studied in cultivation research (Gerbner 1995). For example, people who watch a lot of television significantly overestimate the number of rich people, criminals, policemen, doctors, and lawyers in reality because these types appear so frequently in television programmes, while women, older people, and minorities are underrepresented (Brosius 2003: 139; Gerbner 1995). Another common and important influence is the appropriation of beauty ideals by which one's own body and that of others is judged, which can have a negative effect on self-esteem (Grabe et al. 2008) (as criticised in Mukii's film *Yellow Fever*, see Chapter 4). Psychologist Peter Winterhoff-Spurk (2005) even assumes that television characters are contributing to a characteristic personality type in late modern society, the superficial, self-referential 'histrionic', and mentions that the more frequently television characters are seen smoking, the earlier young viewers start smoking themselves (Winterhoff-Spurk 2005: 163–64). Further research attributes a variety of consequences to the media accumulation of violent or sexualised characters, including catharsis, arousal, disinhibition, imitation or desensitisation of recipients' aggressiveness or sexuality (Staiger 2005: Chapter 7, esp. 167). Moreover, based on Chapter 5 in this book, we can assume that characters also contribute to shaping media users' general ideas about human nature, social categories, folk psychology, and folk sociology. This kind of 'learning' involves not least the acquisition of false opinions, prejudices, and ideological attitudes. Characters are known to exert a considerable influence on the formation and dissemination of stereotypes (Berg 2002; Bar-Tal and Teichman 2005), which has already been discussed in previous chapters (especially 6, 8, and 10) (see Figure 44). On the other hand, characters can also be used to counteract widespread stigmata. Today, many film and television organisations aim for a fairer, more equitable and balanced representation of socially disadvantaged groups, e.g., by conducting colour-blind castings or applying DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) rules. These practical developments are backed up by empirical research on the 'parasocial contact hypothesis'; for example, Edward Schiappa has shown that 'parasocial contact has the potential to decrease prejudice when majority group viewers are exposed repeatedly to diverse [i.e., typical as well as atypical], likeable, and clearly identifiable representations of a minority group' (Schiappa 2008: 99). According to him, the portrayal of minority characters in television programmes can counteract stereotypes and prejudices if it provides sufficient information about the characters and is designed to be positive in terms of the characters' likability, trustworthiness, physical attractiveness, and similarity to viewers. The effect seems to be greatest with viewers who do not have much real-life contact with members of the minority and do not already have strong negative attitudes. A more detailed theory on effective strategies to counter discriminatory stereotypes and stigmatisation through characters in documentaries has been developed by Catalin Brylla (2023). On the basis of such findings, we can more generally assume that characters can contribute to questioning common ideas of reality and developing alternative views of the world and its inhabitants.



Fig. 44 *Star Wars: Episode I* was often criticised for having its alien characters resemble racist stereotypes. Thus, the greedy, underhanded trader Watto could reinforce antisemitic prejudices. (Dir. George Lucas, *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace*, 1999, Lucasfilm, USA. All rights reserved.)

8. Professional, commercial, and political use and impact: characters not only cumulatively and gradually shape the collective imaginary, but they are also consciously and strategically used in various contexts beyond their origins, such as for purposes of vocational training, general education, advertising, or politics. Some of these uses have already been mentioned in the above account of Entertainment-Education, but there are many more. For example, characters fulfil commercial functions as crucial elements of marketing and merchandising. This is most evident in franchises that work with toy companies, such as *Star Wars* or *Transformers*, or in the transmedial reoccurrence of movie characters in theme parks. As tangible play figures, the characters of films or television series insert themselves into the everyday lives of mostly young viewers (Kinder 1991). Psychologist Skip Dine Young outlines further relevant fields of application for films and their characters: in ‘cinemeducation’ they illustrate aspects of physiological or psychological illnesses for medical students, and in other disciplines they serve as vivid paradigms in contexts of university teaching or practical vocational training (Young 2012: 155–57). In Germany, for example, the drama *System Crasher* (*Systemsprenger*) about a traumatised, aggressive girl has been used for training therapists and health administrators. Politics is another area where characters are used purposefully, or where politicians appear as influential characters in public discourses (Bondebjerg 2007, Polletta 2015). Focusing on such non-fictional characters, sociologists James Jasper, Michael Young, and Elke Zuern (2018) explain how social movements ‘carry out extensive character work, trying to define not only their own reputations but those of other major players in their strategic arenas. Victims, villains, and heroes form the essential triad of character work, suggesting not only likely plots but also the emotions that audiences are supposed to feel for various players’ (2018: 113). Such strategies can involve fictional characters, as well. For example, the

Hollywood blockbuster *Avatar* was taken up by various protest groups around the world who dressed up as Navi, the threatened extraterrestrial people in the film, to draw attention to their concerns. Fictional characters or role biographies can also have an impact on the political careers of their actors, as in the case of Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, or Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who played a teacher turned president in the television series *Servant of the People*/*Sluha narodu*.

9. Formation of identity and personality: characters can influence the personality development and identity formation of media users through the processes mentioned above (and presumably others; for a brief overview see Leffelsend, Mauch, and Hannover 2004: 63–64). This basic idea is shared by very different theoretical approaches. Some post-structuralist and psychoanalytic approaches speak of a ‘subject constitution’ or ‘subject positioning’ through media discourses, an unconscious formation of mental dispositions through recurrent processes of desire and identification with characters in sequences of rhetorically structured texts (for an overview see Törrönen 2001). Sociologists speak of ‘media socialisation’, ‘identity work’ and the rehearsal of social roles, psychologists of identity formation through parasocial interactions with media personae. Holger Schramm and Tilo Hartmann (2010), for example, emphasise that in parasocial interactions, media recipients can choose from a variety of roles that are difficult or impossible to perform in reality, and thus playfully try out identities and answer crucial self-related questions (Who am I? What do others think of me?) in a safe space without social consequences. In addition, they can work on their social identity by publicly endorsing or rejecting certain characters or stars to signal their preferences, values or group membership to significant others. Both Jörg Herrmann (2007) and Skip Dine Young (2012: 161–68) have interviewed numerous people about how individual films have influenced their personalities and identities, and characters play crucial roles in their responses. Young’s description of the identity functions of films resembles Schramm and Hartmann’s: through ‘identification’ with characters and interaction in fan cultures, film viewers work out the ‘agentic’ and ‘communal’ dimensions of their self-concept, i.e., how they see themselves, their agency and their social relationships (Young 2012: 165–67). In this context, individual films can become a living part of personal memory and even formative symbols for entire life phases, thus fulfilling autobiographical functions (ibid.: 163–66). There is even evidence that films and characters can fulfil transformational functions and change personality and behavioural dispositions (ibid.: 166–67). On the one hand, for example, relationships to characters can thus have legal implications for the protection of minors (Polster 2024). On the other hand, Young and other authors have outlined how characters are used in ‘cinematherapy’ or ‘cinetherapy’, for example, by providing opportunities for therapists to initiate and guide conversations with their clients that enable them to reflect on their personalities (Young 2012: 155–59; Hesley and Hesley 2001; Heidbrink 2008). The latter effect of characters in particular, their contribution to shaping identity and personality, can also be linked to more recent reflections on the ethical and moral

relevance of film narratives. Based on the philosophical ethics of care and virtue, which acknowledge the power of concrete narrative scenarios, Jane Stadler (2008) works out how feature films can contribute to ethical education through intense empathic and embodied relationships with their characters. Carl Plantinga (2018) also argues that 'screen stories' and their characters promote an 'ethics of engagement'. With a more specific focus, Wyatt Moss-Wellington (2019) considers the functions of stories in the context of a 'narrative humanism' that opposes overly simple moral intuitions by visualising the complexity of human action in its characters and inviting viewers to engage in independent ethical reflection. There seems to be much to suggest that the theories of character effects outlined are fundamentally compatible with each other, and that the kinds of effects they mention may build on or complement each other. Moreover, the list indicates that some kinds of effects are based on spontaneously experiencing and understanding characters as represented beings, while others are also based on more conscious and reflective interpretation of characters as artefacts, symbols, or symptoms. Even psychologists like Young concede that many far-reaching and complex effects are based on profound forms of interpretation and self-reflection, which are 'difficult to observe in a strictly controlled laboratory setting' and thus require more qualitative or interpretive methods (Young 2012: 169).

In summary, characters—and their various properties as represented beings, artefacts, or symbols—can be analysed and interpreted as symptoms in various ways. On the one hand, we can focus on the causes for the genesis of characters, including the motives of filmmakers, certain media structures or larger sociocultural contexts. On the other, we can focus on the effects of characters on particular audiences, cultural structures or society at large, for example through processes of observational learning, cultivation, stereotyping or identity formation. Third, the causes and effects of characters, or their production and reception, can also be considered in their interconnectedness, as the creators of characters and their audiences share certain mental dispositions and the former regularly try to anticipate the reactions of the latter (see Chapter 3). This interconnection is particularly clear in the case of characters in advertising, propaganda and other persuasive media; it is more complex and difficult to grasp in the case of artistic works. Finally, we can not only examine individual characters as symptoms, but the analysis can be extended to recurring character types (often associated with certain media genres and conventions; see Chapter 8) and can be directed towards the relations of such types with the history of collective mentalities, ideas or affect structures (as, for example, Robert Warshow, Siegfried Kracauer or Leo Löwenthal did; see Chapter 2).

When viewers experience a character as a symptom, they intuitively and spontaneously pick out specific individual aspects from this broad field of possibilities that correspond to their subjective interests, such as the character's relationship to a director's motives. A systematic character analysis, however, needs to justify its selective focus. This requires first obtaining an approximate overview of the multiple

causes and effects of the character in question and, on this basis, determining one's own area of interest more precisely. This is presuppositional in many respects, including the entangled intentionality of the participants in the communication: for example, one might try to reconstruct the assumptions of today's audience about what the filmmakers wanted their target audience at the time to think the character was feeling. Such mental complexity can only be grasped by drawing on multiple disciplines, methods and conceptual systems (see Chapter 3). In doing so, far-reaching theoretical decisions must also be made in advance, such as whether one should rather start from anthropological constants or cultural differences, from current communication situations or historical developments. For these reasons, the analysis of characters as symptoms is always a challenge, and its results are often controversial.

12.3 An Example: Characters as Symbols and Symptoms in *Casablanca*

We have now seen the different ways in which characters can be understood as symbols and symptoms, and the various kinds of meanings, causes and effects they can have. Before we return to our example of *Casablanca*, it is important to remember that the symbolic and the symptomatic properties of characters are interrelated but should be distinguished from each other in the analysis.

The symbolism and symptomatology of characters—or of films and artworks in general—are interrelated, because when interpreting characters as symbols, reference to textual structures is usually not enough, and one also has to refer to their individual, medial, or cultural contexts. And conversely, well-founded statements about contextual causes or effects of characters are often only possible if one takes their higher meanings into account, because many of these causes and effects are ultimately mental in nature and may include higher meanings in some way. For example, one cause of a character's design might be that its creator wanted to convey a certain theme through it. And some effects of the character might be based on the thoughts and feelings it invokes in the audience regarding that theme. In such cases, the symbolic meanings of the character seem to arise directly from certain mental causes (the author's intentions) or to directly trigger certain effects (the audience's reactions).

This view would be too simplistic, however. Despite the close connections between symbolism and symptomatology, there are also crucial differences between them. The analysis of characters as symbols focuses on their higher meanings in their own right. As intersubjective outcomes of ideal communication, these meanings do not necessarily correspond to the author's intended meanings, nor to the meanings experienced by a particular audience (perhaps, after all, the author designed the character clumsily, or the audience misunderstood it; see Chapter 3). In contrast, when we consider characters as symptoms, we often examine precisely these subjective, contingent understandings by the author or a specific audience, in their capacity as causes or effects. Another

difference between symbolism and symptomatology is, of course, that the causes and effects of a character involve much more than its higher meanings. For example, if one examines which technical innovations made possible the digital effects that shaped the physical appearance of a character, indirect meanings do not play any role.

Therefore, when analysing characters, one should distinguish between their symbolism and their symptomatology. Characteristic ways of speaking can be used as a test. If characters are regarded as symbols, they are said to 'stand for', 'embody', or 'exemplify' a higher meaning. If, on the other hand, they are considered as symptoms, they are said to have their properties 'because of' certain causes, or to 'cause' something in the real world.

In the following, central issues of symbolism and symptomatology, including their connections and differences, will be outlined using the example of *Casablanca*. My aim here is not to develop an original interpretation of my own, but primarily to look at how the main character Rick has been interpreted by others as a symbol or symptom. More detailed information on that can be found in the numerous production and reception histories of *Casablanca*, which also deal with the characters of the film (e.g., Harmetz 2001, Isenberg 2017, Klinger 2022, Siegel 1992). My following brief outline draws on that literature and on findings from previous chapters in this book.

As a symbol, Rick embodies, among other things, a certain kind of personality—a dynamic constellation of traits including toughness, experience, presence, competence, sentimentality, emotional control, coolness and a sarcastic sense of humour. Taken together, these traits form a historically and culturally specific ideal of masculinity exemplified by Rick. This ideal is reinforced by the complementary character developments from the initially 'hard, active' to the 'soft, passive' Ilsa and from the 'soft, passive' to the 'hard, active' Rick. On the symptomatic level, this masculinity ideal in turn refers to the cultural contexts, hegemonic discourses, and traditional gender roles of a patriarchal society, which shaped the individual ideas of the filmmakers and their target audience. The specifics are interesting here, such as the self-centred sentimentality behind Rick's outward toughness, or the question how his embodiment of masculinity differs from that of other characters in the film, or in other texts.

Equally interesting is the development of characters' values and decisions, which in Rick's case culminates in his choice between love and duty. On the symbolic level, several interpretations are conceivable. Rick is often understood as a personification of the United States, of the US population or of President Roosevelt. He embodies 'America's mythical self-image: a tough shell and a core of moral integrity, capable of self-sacrifice and romantic enthusiasm without sacrificing individualism [...] and prepared to stick out its neck for everyone when heroism was needed' (Harmetz 2001: 14). According to this view, Rick's development from an egotistical capitalist to an idealistic freedom fighter reflects US foreign policy during the Second World War, which progressed from isolationism to active intervention:

Casablanca is an exploration of the universal themes of love and sacrifice, but when the film was released in 1942, audiences viewed it as a political allegory about World War II. The film is set in December 1941, the month the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. That attack changed the course of American history, awakening the nation from political neutrality and thrusting it into the midst of World War II. *Casablanca* tells the story of a similar, though much smaller, awakening. (Grosz 2007)

Other interpretations have read Rick more specifically 'as President Roosevelt (*casa blanca* is Spanish for 'white house'), a man who gambles on the odds of going to war until circumstances and his own submerged nobility force him to close his casino (read: partisan politics) and commit himself—first by financing the Side of Right and then by fighting for it' (Corliss 1973: 186). Such readings depend on contingent contextual factors, such as 'that, two months after *Casablanca* opened, Roosevelt (Rick) and Prime Minister Winston Churchill (Lazlo) met for a war conference in Casablanca' (ibid.: 187). Other characters could be interpreted in an analogous way, for example, Ilsa Lund and Victor Laszlo as embodiments of resistance movements, Louis Renault as representing the United States' European allies, or Major Strasser the whole of Nazi Germany.

However, Rick's development as a symbol is not only part of a contemporary political allegory; his character also suggests more general meanings that transcend time or culture. For example, his story has been interpreted as a farewell to childhood, a coming of age, and an assumption of responsibility. A variety of basic human experiences are brought together in it. Following Blothner's typology of psychological 'basic complexes' (1999), for example, we could interpret Rick's character arc as a development from separation to reunion (with Ilsa), from humiliation (as a forsaken lover) to triumph, from passivity to activity, from aimlessness to upholding values, from deception to truth, from weakness to strength, from being ruled by the past to shaping the future, from restriction (his casino microcosm) to openness (his departure for Brazzaville). Viewers can share the experience of these positively connoted changes, which are loaded with norms and values. The timelessness of some symbolic qualities is also indicated by the fact that Rick and the other characters can still be understood today as the embodiment of certain general attitudes towards migration and war. For example, Rick actively helps refugees while others exploit them.

Furthermore, many of the characters convey thematic messages. For instance, Rick can be understood as representing a number of thematic statements such as 'responsibility for the common good is more important than personal interests', 'duty is more important than love', 'the most dire crises can make one stronger', or 'maintaining one's own integrity is worth even great sacrifice'. Other characters in the constellation are linked to other, though less prominent themes. Ilsa's profound desperation, which becomes intensely tangible after she says farewell to Rick at the end of the film, results from her being irreconcilably torn between Rick and Laszlo, between love and loyalty, and her inability to make her own decision. She leaves the

decision-making to Rick, abandoning her ability to shape the future, and assumes a passive, fatalistic posture (symptomatically indicating the gender roles mentioned above). Various interpretations are possible here too, such as ‘sometimes all decisions in life are wrong, and unhappiness is unavoidable’, or ‘letting others take over can entail consequences’. Today, in a climate of individualisation and polarisation, Rick’s statement that ‘the problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world’ may also resonate.

Which of the film’s symbolic meanings, themes and messages come to the fore usually depends on which characters attract the most attention and involvement, as well as on the sociocultural contexts of the time—and on associated types of symptomatic interpretation. How symbolic and symptomatic understanding are interconnected can be seen, for example, in the interpretations of *Casablanca* as political allegory and of Rick as a symbol of the USA, which are usually supported by reference to the filmmakers’ political motives. Murray Burnett wrote the play *Everybody Comes to Rick’s* (together with Joan Alison) after visiting Nazi-occupied Vienna, and most of the individuals involved in film production were already antifascists when the US government was still trying to avoid conflict with Nazi Germany. Many of them were Jewish (Burnett; the Warner brothers, who owned the studio; and the Epstein brothers, who wrote parts of the screenplay), leftists (Bogart, screenwriter Koch) or European emigrants (director Curtiz and most of the cast). The intention of using Rick as a behavioural model to mobilise the American population against the Nazis was reinforced by the events of the time, such as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and entry of the United States into the war. When the film *Casablanca* premiered on 26 November 1942, the city of Casablanca was in the headlines because American troops had just landed in North Africa. The flag of Free France was hoisted in the cinemas and the Marseillaise was sung (Harmetz 2001: 21, 329). All that suggested political interpretations, while in many of today’s contexts, the general, trans-temporal meanings will become more important. Considering Rick as a symbol thus already points to some of the symptomatic causes and effects of the character in particular times and spaces.

This, however, does not by any means exhaust the study of Rick as a symptom. The popularity and influence of *Casablanca* and its characters are obvious. Google returns 174,000 hits for ‘Rick Blaine’ (in 2007) and more than thirty-nine million for ‘Casablanca film’ (in 2023), many of them referring to specific causes and effects of the film and its characters. In 1977, *Casablanca* was the most frequently broadcast feature film on US television. In 1983, it was voted the third best film of all time by the American Film Institute and the best film of all time by the British Film Institute, and the screenplay still tops the Writers’ Guild of America’s ‘101 Greatest Screenplays’ list (2023). The American Film Institute (AFI) lists Rick Blaine as number 4 in its list of the ‘100 Greatest Heroes and Villains’ (after Atticus Finch, Indiana Jones, and James Bond; AFI n.d.). This popularity is often explained by saying that the characters of *Casablanca* appeal to commonly shared patterns of experience or collective affect structures that are thought to have influenced both the filmmaker’s production process and the audience’s selection, reception and

use of the film. Psychoanalytic film theorists, for example, point to widespread fears of loss, erotic longings, desires for power and perfection, and some of them assume that production and reception were or are unconsciously but strongly determined by Oedipal relationship patterns, male castration fears or misogynistic sadism (e.g., Gabbard and Gabbard 1990). Such explanations of collective mental causes and effects are interesting, but implicitly presuppose many assumptions that are difficult to prove or outright problematic, such as the acceptance of controversial psychoanalytic theories (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 6). In relation to Rick, other causes in production and effects in reception can be examined that are more verifiable, specific and concrete and could be tested for their connections with collective affects.

On the side of the *causes* of characters, for example, we can examine the documented processes of film production and state of affairs of the people involved. Several different screenwriters, brought together by producer Hal Wallis, played a role in the construction of the character Rick (see Harmetz 2001: Chapter 3): Murray Burnett and Joan Alison created the basic outline; Howard Koch modified and politicised it; the Epstein twins added humour and quick wit to the dialogue. The actors' contributions are also significant. Many legends surround *Casablanca* in this regard, for example, that the line 'Here's looking at you, kid' was improvised by Bogart, that Rick plays chess because Bogart was a chess lover, or that Rick's sad and bitter manner has a source in Bogart's problematic relationship with his jealous wife Mayo Methot (Riis 2002). Other authors point to possible real-life models for the character: 'So who was Rick based on? Was there, in the New York of 1938–40, a cynical nightclub owner whose toughness was joined by a concern for Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi oppression? The answer to that one is easy: Billy Rose. Rose was the real Rick Blaine, and Rose's Casa Mañana was the real Rick's Café Américain' (Cohen 2018). More generally, features of various intertextual models were probably incorporated into Rick's portrayal, including traditional Westerns and outlaws, gangsters and detectives, but also past film heroes such as Rhett Butler and Jay Gatsby (Harmetz 2001: Chapter 20). Further possible inspirations appear in a note to Hal Wallis by script reader Robert Buckner, who critically remarks that 'this guy Rick is two-parts Hemingway, one-part Fitzgerald and dash of café Christ' (quoted in Writers Guild of America West n.d.). Furthermore, censorship by the Production Code played a role in Rick's construction, as the filmmakers negotiated with the censors over the permissible level of erotic tension between Rick and Ilsa (Harmetz 2001: Chapter 9).

On a more abstract level, Rick's personality could be traced back to the cultural history of ideologies and mentalities. The National WWII Museum in New Orleans, for example, gives a description of American ideals of masculinity at the time when *Casablanca* was filmed, strikingly similar to Rick's personality:

In the early 1940s, American society expected its men to adhere to specific characteristics that defined masculinity. In addition to courage and bravery, men strove to develop traits such as aggression, competition, stoicism, toughness, and independence in order to prove to others that they were truly masculine. Historian E. Anthony Rotundo teaches

that Americans even believed that physical and 'fighting virtues' played significant roles in a man's identity because they built character. (Pitt 2021)

This is not the place to go into more depth here. However, we can state that a complex web of causal factors was involved in the development of the character Rick, ranging from individual contributions of the film team to structures of the media system such as the Production Code, to intertextual models and sociocultural roles, mentalities and affect structures.



Fig. 45 Use of Rick/Bogart in advertising (here: for a German clothing retailer). (Image courtesy of Mientus Berlin/Humphrey Bogart/Columbiafilm/Interfoto. All rights reserved.)

The reception, use, and impact side of Rick is no less complex. As already mentioned, *Casablanca* appeared in a political context directly related to its narrative and was intended to mobilise the US public for the war against the Axis powers and strengthen its will to support it. To what extent this goal was achieved is difficult to say, but the situation was favourable. Shortly before the film's premiere on 26 November 1942, the city of Casablanca was liberated by the Allies in Operation Torch, and before its nationwide release in February 1943, Roosevelt and Churchill met at the Casablanca Conference. The news was full of both events, and film reviews referred to them, as in *The San Diego Union-Tribune*: 'While *Casablanca* as a film has nothing to do with the recent conference of great men, nevertheless it comes at a time when the public wants to learn more about the North African situation' (Short 1943). The film also had politically influential audiences; for example, a special screening was organised for President Roosevelt, his family and guests on New Year's Eve 1942. In stark contrast, when *Casablanca* was released in German cinemas in 1952, the political references, especially to the fight against the Nazis, were edited out as much as possible. As a result, Rick's role and essential characteristics also change in the heavily cut first German version.

After the death of Humphrey Bogart in 1957, the appropriation of the star and his most iconic character by US audiences took a new turn. In the early 1960s, a wave of cult screenings in university cinemas, starting with the Brattle at Harvard, sparked a 'Bogey fever'. In an interview with the Brattle's former creative director, Ned Hinkle, the *Harvard Gazette* looks back:

Fans came dressed in costume and repeated the movie's lines; they smuggled in champagne and delivered marriage proposals; they stood and sang along to 'La Marseillaise.' But it wasn't just the role of a lifetime that elevated Bogart to legend, Hinkle pointed out. It was also the times. 'I think that Bogart, a tough guy with a heart of gold, an antihero, not your classically good-looking guy but clearly magnetic, all of these things sort of pointed him in the direction of being a hipster ... the beatniks and the hippies and the counterculture groups at the time were the original hipsters in a way. He was part of that. He just somehow struck a chord and people just kept coming out.' Today the Brattle shows the film a couple of times a year—always on Valentine's Day to a sellout crowd. Proposals and first dates are still common. (Walsh 2017)

Barbara Klinger has detailed how fan audiences developed a 'cult film habitus' that influenced their behaviour and thinking, leading to 'rapt devotion' and 'grounding a shared culture' (Klinger 2022: 91). According to her, 'Rick Blaine's associated noirish tough-guy-with-a-heart in *Casablanca* allowed both male and female students to identify with his "cool" masculinity, outsider status, and antiauthoritarianism, giving them fodder for marshalling their own sub-cultural capital' (ibid.: 94). Based on documented audience reactions, Klinger reconstructs how Bogart and his characters 'inspired both heterosexual and homosocial fantasies as a paragon of masculinity'. Fans 'fetishized his style as an anthology of micromannerisms', including his ways

of speaking and smoking as well as subtle facial expressions and bodily movements (ibid.: 94). She concludes, 'The seemingly renegade space of the Brattle, its ritual festival programming of Bogart's films, student desire to reel against university exam structures, and the context of postwar countercultures informed and amplified Bogart's contra-mainstream cult identity. The actor served not only as a fantasy gender model and a detailed manual of personal style but also as an antiestablishment figure'. (Klinger 2022: 95). Although Klinger and other authors focus on the star Bogart, it is clear that this star's image was defined by his roles, especially his role as Rick Blaine.

More generally, since the 1940s, many viewers have imitated Rick, taking him as an object of fantasy and a model for observational learning. This involved not only the political stance and attitude to the war, but also everyday behaviour, with Bogart the star and Rick the character sometimes almost indistinguishable. A cigarette dangling casually from the corner of the mouth (and later—not sharing a joint) soon became known as 'bogarting'. Dialogues like 'Here's looking at you, kid' burned themselves into the collective memory and were spoken aloud by the audience. This ritualised imitation may have accompanied and intensified the acquisition of or play with the gender role associated with the character, the spectators' own staging of masculinity or their compensation for feelings of inadequacy. Marc Augé's essay *Casablanca: Movies and Memory* (2009) shows how deeply Rick also entered the memories, fantasies and identities of many European viewers and became interwoven with real experiences of the post-war period.

Rick, however, has left traces not only on the consciousness of his audience, but also in countless films and other media texts, as intertextual references to *Casablanca* show. The Internet Movie Database lists dozens of film and television productions that incorporate its characters, including an Indian remake and two television series (1955 and 1983). Bogart's main character in *To Have and Have Not* (1944), for example, was modelled on Rick, and the relationship between Ilsa and Rick is discussed by the title characters in *When Harry Met Sally* (1989). A particularly revealing example of filmmakers' and viewers' later engagement with the character Rick and his ideal of masculinity is Woody Allen's *Play It Again, Sam* (1969). The title of the film already (mis)quotes *Casablanca*, and its anti-hero (Woody Allen) repeatedly talks to his idol Bogart, who appears to him as Rick and gives advice on how to deal with women. Allan eventually succeeds in freeing himself from Bogart/Rick's toxic ideal of hard masculinity, realises that he should rather treat his lover as an equal, and thus finds his own integrity. (The allegations of sexual abuse against Woody Allen will again have changed many viewers' perceptions of his characters, which stresses the importance of the symptomatic level of understanding characters.)

Rick's cultural presence is not only intertextual but also transmedial.⁶ He, or rather versions and depictions of him, appear in novels (e.g., Michael Walsh's *As Time*

6 On the peculiar challenges of understanding the transmediality of characters, see Thon and Pearson 2022, or Kunz and Wilde 2023.

Goes By, 1998), in the form of dolls, action figures and statues, and on promotional and merchandising products in various countries, from bed sheets to coffee mugs (Figure 45). Fans adore or parody him in all kinds of fan art, buying and wearing transformative Rick costumes, such as his famous trench coat or ivory dinner jacket. When characters are embodied or re-enacted in this way, when their perspective is taken and spectators imagine becoming like them, it shows the affective power they have as symbols and symptoms. Such forms of perspective-taking and affectivity form an important, often neglected area of the affective involvement with characters, which will be considered more generally in the following chapters.

12.4 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions on Characters as Symptoms

1. Does the character as symptom invite thoughts about its causes in production or its effects in reception?
2. Production: What individual or collective causes contribute to the emergence of the character? What conscious or unconscious motives of the filmmakers, what political, economic, technical, practical circumstances of production, what more general political or sociocultural contexts contribute to the creation of the character? What impact intentions are associated with the characters, are they intended to be enlightening, educational, therapeutic, promotional, ideological or propagandistic? How could this be evaluated from an ethical, aesthetic, or political point of view?
3. Reception: What individual or collective effects does the character have on actual audiences? Does it stimulate thoughts, questions, or learning processes? Does it reinforce or challenge existing ideas, affect structures, values or norms? Does it encourage people to engage with the (social) world? Does it overwhelm or manipulate the audience?
4. In what ways do these effects arise: through fantasies, vicarious wish fulfilment, observational learning, imitation, narrative persuasion, ritual worship (in religious or fan cultures), cultivation, identity formation, influencing actual social relationships (including stereotypes and prejudices)?
5. To what extent does the character contribute to sociocultural, ideological and political discourses and developments, and how could this be evaluated?
6. Does the character belong to a set of similar characters in other media texts whose presence provides information about a certain cultural background or cumulatively influences the audience? How does this happen?

7. To what extent can the production and reception of the character be seen as part of a coherent and successful communication process? Do filmmakers and viewers share certain mental dispositions so that the character actually achieves the desired effects? Or do intended effects differ from actual effects in heterogeneous audiences and communities of affect and interpretation?
8. What are the connections between the symptomatology of the character and its symbolism? What role do the character's overarching meanings play in production and reception and vice versa?

PART VII: IMAGINATIVE AND AFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT WITH CHARACTERS

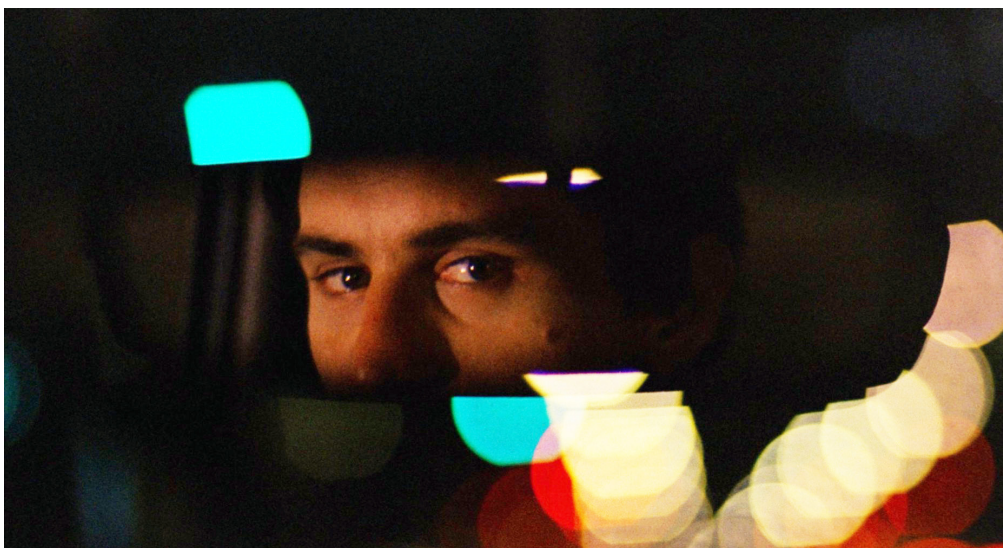


Fig. 46 *Taxi Driver*: towards the end of the film, Travis Bickle, who was celebrated as a hero by the media, looks into the taxi's rear-view mirror—and into the eyes of the audience. This moment of parasocial interaction suggests that Bickle remains dangerous, and involves the audience in this situation. (Dir. Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver*, 1976, Bill/Phillips Productions/Italo-Judeo Productions, USA. All rights reserved.)

Part VII

The previous chapters have developed concepts and tools to analyse characters as represented beings, artefacts, symbols, and symptoms, as well as corresponding processes of perception and cognition on the part of the audience. Based on that, the next two chapters will now focus on the imaginative and affective experiences of character reception and the various forms of involvement or engagement with characters (*Anteilnahme*).¹ The farewell scene of *Casablanca*, for example, is considered an emotional climax in which Ilsa's anguished beauty, Rick's serious determination, their haunting

¹ In English there is no clear equivalent to the German word 'Anteilnahme'; it is translated here and in the following as 'involvement', but 'engagement' would also be possible, for example.

glances, their moving exchange of words touch many viewers deeply. Such experiences also have a physical side, in changes of the heartbeat, breathing, brain activity, hormone release, muscle tension or facial expressions. Viewers follow the characters with their eyes, cheer them on or shout warnings at them, cling to the cinema seat, laugh about them or cry with them, mirror their facial expressions or sing along with their songs. Besides fleeting experiences in certain situations, audience reactions also include more stable relationships of closeness and distance, sympathy or antipathy. Such forms of imaginative and affective involvement have a certain perspective and intensity: the spectators turn to the characters with interest or remain disinterested, they desire or loathe the characters, put themselves in their shoes or look at them from a distance with cold fascination. After the film, viewers often talk about characters, imitate their posture, their gait, their way of speaking, describe and critically judge them, and sometimes remember them fondly or fearfully for a long time.

These are all signs of intense involvement with the characters. But how do such imaginative and affective reactions and relationships arise, and how can they be explained and described more precisely? Theories from several disciplines answer such questions very differently. The following chapters provide an overview of the controversial discussion and develop my own approach to the affectivity of characters. This approach could be summarised by the term *perspectivised multilevel appraisal*. Its basic principles are, firstly, that the reaction to depicted beings already encompasses several levels and degrees of awareness and appraisal, from preconscious sensation to concentrated reflection. Secondly, affective reactions to characters always occur from a particular perspective, which is based on audience dispositions but can be deliberately shaped by films or other media texts. And thirdly, characters evoke affective reactions not only as represented beings, but also as artefacts, symbols, and symptoms. All this results in specific differences between affective reactions to characters and to persons in reality. This approach differs from prevailing theories, which mostly remain limited to concepts of moral evaluation, parasocial interaction, or identification with depicted beings, without sufficiently taking into account the perspectivity, multi-layeredness and aspectuality of affective responses to characters. In several publications after this book, I have outlined my view of affective media responses more generally and presented specific areas in more detail.² In the following chapters, my approach to imaginative and affective involvement with characters is developed step by step.

A superficial look already shows that the forms of involvement with characters are very diverse and at the same time closely interconnected, and that they often have relevant consequences for the audience and society (see Chapter 11 and Chapter 12). Character-related affects range from casual interest or physical shock to intensely reflected experiences of complex emotions. We often enjoy watching characters

2 See, for instance, Eder 2016b on existential feelings; Eder 2017 on empathy; Eder 2018 on diverging political emotions; Eder, Hanich, and Stadler 2019 on media and emotions in general; Eder 2022 on the affective specificity of film; as well as several earlier publications (mostly in German).

simply because they seem elegant, erotic, admirable, glamorous, frightening, strange, or bizarre. But we can also be curious about their story, their actions and their developments. Many of them are involved in exciting conflicts or come up with ever new surprises. Some do forbidden, fascinating things, others make it possible to free oneself cathartically from burdensome sentiments. We can observe them unhindered in private moments and have the thrilling feeling of breaking taboos. Characters can affect self-esteem: they are so silly that we feel wise, or they convey a sense of power, beauty, brilliance, or virtuosity when we imagine being (like) them. Sometimes they keep us company at the end of the day, drive away loneliness or boredom. Some confirm our view of the world and our knowledge of human nature, make us feel that we, as autonomous, free subjects, are capable of acting in the best possible way. Others challenge our very beliefs and values, asking us to discover new things or face unpleasant truths. Whole genres are defined by specific relationships with their protagonists: in comedies we laugh at them, in melodramas we commiserate with them, in thrillers we fear for them. The experimental avant-garde, such as surrealist film, breaks with such conventionalised patterns of effect and creates others: shock, disturbance, frustration, provocation, insight or ironic amusement at the absurd.

Characters that trigger intense affects can also be a means to better understand other people, oneself or general life contexts, to deepen one's empathy or moral judgement. They can make it more understandable what it means to be a certain kind of person or a completely different being. Characters can seem so alien that we want to know how they 'work', or they are like someone we know well. If we think the characters are like us, we can hope to learn something about ourselves through them, to recognise faults and weaknesses and to find solutions. If, on the other hand, they are like acquaintances or strangers, they can give us insights into their behaviour, desires, feelings, thinking. As positive role models, cautionary examples or objects of detached analysis, characters inform us about social behaviour and its consequences. They make it possible to perceive the world from other perspectives, to play out possibilities in the imagination and to try them out without risk. Perhaps they have dreams that we also have, or they live through situations that we would like to be prepared for. Many characters experience, say or think interesting things. In their company we learn concrete things about other life worlds: What is it like in 1940s Casablanca, in a gene lab, in a slum, or in the jungle; how do people live, love, and work there? Studies of the personality or psychology of characters reveal what someone is like who has done something great or terrible. Many main characters also ask us to relate to their experiences and explore our own inner lives on that basis.

This by no means exhaustive list already makes it clear that one-sided, sweeping explanations do not do justice to the diverse fascination of characters. Rather, the diversity of involvement with them requires an open attitude that considers as many explanatory approaches as possible. In scholarship and practice, audience reactions are often explained too simplistically, for example, exclusively as adopting the characters'

perspective, putting oneself in their place, identifying with them, feeling with them. As will be shown, however, it is usually not even clear what is actually meant by such statements. There are many theories that propose more sophisticated models of involvement or engagement with characters, but the theoretical field is split into individual positions, many of which contradict each other. This has consequences for understanding many areas of scholarship and media practice that deal with audience responses to characters, from storytelling to media criticism.

In the following chapters, therefore, I will again try to combine the results of various theories in an integrative approach. Chapter 13 first proposes a general model of imaginative involvement with represented beings, showing how different forms of audiovisual and narrative perspectivisation interact with other factors in creating imaginative closeness and distance. Chapter 14 then looks more closely at viewers' affective responses to characters, building on the previous chapters. It will argue that to understand these responses, all four aspects of characters must be taken into account—that is, not only their qualities as represented beings, but also as symbols, symptoms and artefacts.

Nevertheless, this part of the book will first focus on involvement with the characters as represented beings (for example in the form of appraisals, desires, feelings, fantasies, and perceived relations to oneself), as this aspect is already very complex and usually dominates both the affective experience itself and the academic discussion about it (see Diagram 27). Audience reactions to characters as artefacts, symbols, and symptoms will be discussed in more detail later in Chapter 16, using an example.

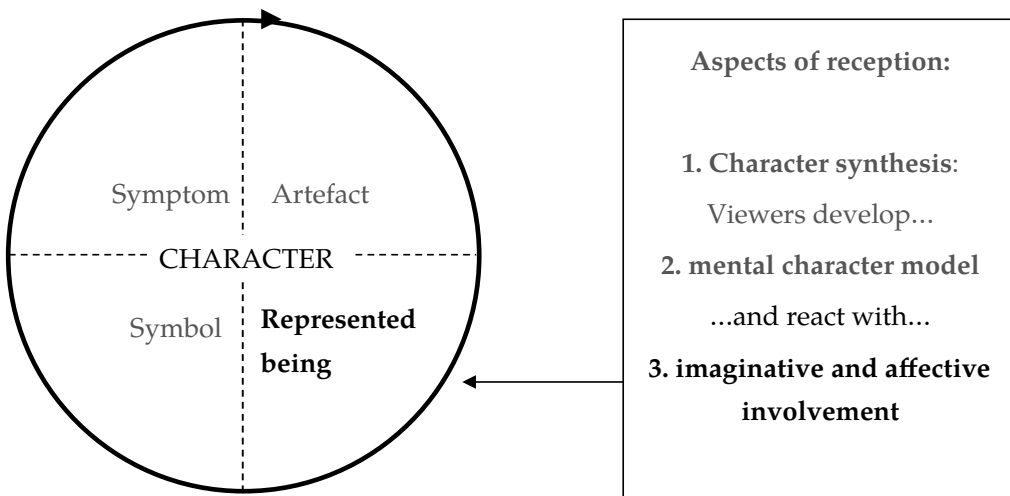


Diagram 27 Imaginative and affective involvement with characters as represented beings

13. Imaginative Involvement with Characters: A Matter of Perspective

13.1 Current Theories of Involvement with Characters

Any general model of viewer (or reader, listener, audience) involvement with characters faces the following questions: What are the types and aspects of imaginative and affective involvement, how are they related, and what concepts can adequately describe them? What structures of characters and their representation underlie the response (e.g., physicality, psyche, sociality; camera, music, editing)? In what ways do viewers feel close to the characters in their experience—do they react to them ‘from the outside’ as judging observers or rather ‘from the inside’ by feeling with them? To what extent is their involvement focused on individual characters within the constellation or distributed among several characters? What audience dispositions shape involvement, and to what extent are these dispositions innate or learned, are they biological, sociocultural or individually determined? To what extent do different viewers react similarly or differently to a character and why? To what extent are certain types of their reactions subjective or intersubjective, conscious or unconscious, rational or irrational?

Opinions on such questions diverge widely in academic discussion and in film practice. Many explanations that are common in everyday understanding turn out to be ambiguous and problematic upon closer examination. In everyday conversations about characters, but also in academic papers, it is often said that one ‘takes their perspective’, ‘identifies with them’, or ‘feels empathy with them’, and films are harshly criticised when they do not permit this. But what is actually meant by ‘perspective’, ‘identification’ and ‘empathy’? It has often been pointed out how equivocal or misleading these terms are, and it has therefore been suggested that they should be replaced by other concepts.¹

In view of such questions, I will first give a brief overview of the currently most influential theories of involvement or engagement with characters and their central concepts. On this basis, I will propose my own model of engagement with represented

1 Chatman (1986) prefers to avoid the concept of perspective, and Smith (1995) rejects the notions of identification and focalisation. In regard to empathy cf. Neill 1996; Plantinga 1999.

beings and develop it further in Chapter 14. In doing so, I build on the findings of previous chapters in this book. Involvement with represented beings is part of reception (Chapter 3) and presupposes the perception of character representations and the formation of mental models (Chapters 5, 6). It is guided by an interplay of film form and audience dispositions, including knowledge of media and culture (Chapter 7). Involvement is usually distributed across several characters (Chapter 10), whose motives and actions are of particular importance (Chapter 9). Audience involvement is composed of sensory-perceptual, cognitive, affective, evaluative and motivational reactions to the character representations and models. These reactions include different kinds of imagination, because the depicted beings and their environment can only be grasped by means of seeing-as, by drawing conclusions and filling in textual gaps. In *Casablanca*, for example, we imagine seeing the lovers Rick Blaine and Ilsa Lund, although we only see images of the actors Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman.² In this context, I will also speak of imaginative proximity or distance to characters.

The following theory overview is based on the information available when this book was first published (2008), and many important publications have appeared since then that cannot yet be included here (for example, by Margrethe Bruun Vaage, Julian Hanich, Carl Plantinga, or Jane Stadler). Nevertheless, I am convinced that the main features and basic questions of the overview still apply and that my own approach has by no means become outdated, but is rather confirmed by more recent work. Readers may decide for themselves to what extent this is correct.

The theories of involvement with characters form a vast and chaotic field. They follow different theoretical paradigms and set different priorities. Three predominant paradigms can be distinguished (cultural and social science theories operate at a higher level and usually presuppose one of these more basic paradigms; see Chapter 2).³

Psychoanalytic positions attribute the response to characters primarily to unconscious aspects of drives and desire: early childhood experience of lack, phases of sexual development, or formative relationship patterns. They explain the involvement either by forms of 'identification' with a figure and its characteristics or by the 'transference' of forms of relationships acquired in dealing with real people (such as the parents) to characters.⁴ Thus male viewers could identify with Rick Blaine, transfer desires or disappointments from earlier relationships to Ilsa Lund, or narcissistically share in his power over her.

Analytical-philosophical positions, on the other hand, are based on an understanding of spectatorship and character engagement that emphasises the importance of cognition, practical rationality, and collective norms. The philosophy of the mind and the way we think and talk about characters provide the basis for these approaches.

2 Cf. Smith 1995: 76; Currie and Ravenscroft 2002: 1–46; Wilson 2006 on various concepts of imagination.

3 Older models from literary theory such as Jauß's concept of identification (1984) hardly play a role in current discussion, at least in film and media studies.

4 Cf. Allen 1999; Aumont et al. 1992 for an overview. Cowie 1997 provides a differentiated example.

They attribute involvement primarily to the fact that viewers perceive characters as distanced observers 'from outside', judge them according to intersubjective criteria, particularly moral ones, and react with corresponding emotions. Cognitive processes therefore form a necessary basis for emotional ones.⁵ According to such theories, the audience could evaluate Rick and Ilsa as morally positive and react to them with moral feelings of esteem and respect.

Empirical-scientific positions are based on evolutionary psychology, neurosciences, or cognitive psychology, thus forming a heterogeneous field. Some of them explain involvement through conscious appraisal processes, others through autonomous physical reactions, and others again through empathic simulation of characters' experiences.⁶ The range of explanations for affective reactions extends from evolutionary 'affect programs' through socioculturally specific patterns of experience to individual emotional memory. To pick just a few possibilities: the audience could feel involuntarily attracted by sexual stimuli from Rick or Ilsa, be infected with sadness by their emotional expression, activate socially learned evaluation schemes, or remember personal experiences of loss.

In the context of such paradigms, some theories develop overarching accounts, while others rather focus on specific aspects, including visual, auditory, narrative, imaginative, affective, or social forms of involvement and impact. The most concrete detail theories deal with the visual and auditory relationship of spectators to characters established through camera work, sound design, or editing.⁷ Thus, the bodies of the characters are arranged in a space defined by a certain perspective in image and sound. The choice of lenses and shot sizes conveys spatial proximity or distance, flashbacks and subjective shots provide information about perceptions or memories, the editing lets different characters move into the foreground or background. Some theories attach particular importance to the relationship between the characters' and the viewer's gazes, for example with how the viewer's attention is directed by the characters' gazes and converges on the gaze of certain characters. Theories of 'suturing' assume that spectators have the impression of being embedded as participating observers in the spaces portrayed or of being integrated into the action through visual expectations.

While such theories focus on audiovisual aesthetics and the viewers' perceptual perspective in relation to characters, narrative theories use concepts such as 'narrative perspective', 'focalisation', or 'point of view' to investigate the broader narrative perspective structure of films.⁸ This structure includes all relationships of perception, information, knowledge, and values between viewers, characters, narrators, and filmmakers: What do the characters, the narrators, and the viewers see or know at a

5 E.g., Carroll 1998a: 245–90; Yanal 1999.

6 E.g., most of the articles in Frijda and Schram 1994; Grodal 2001; Schwender 2001; Tan 1996.

7 See Maltby 2003: Chapter 11 and Persson 2003: Chapters 2–3 for an overview.

8 See Borstnar, Pabst, and Wulff 2002: chapter 3.5 for an overview.

certain time? Experiencing narratives depends on such questions in many respects, for example concerning the access to characters' inner lives; the choice of inner or outer, single or multiple perspectives; the reliability of the narration; or the generation of suspense, surprise, and curiosity about characters' actions and fates.

Both theories of audiovisual-aesthetic and narrative involvement are primarily text-oriented; they refer to 'objective' film structures and are based on fundamental processes in reception regarding the understanding, perception, and mental modelling of characters. Other positions deal explicitly with more controversial viewer reactions that go beyond such basic reception processes. Thus, psychoanalytic film theories assume that viewers relate to characters in terms of identification, transference, or projection of desire, voyeurism, fetishism, sadism, or masochism (e.g., Cowie 1997). Neuroscientific approaches describe body-based processes of 'simulation' in which viewers approach the experience of characters (e.g., Grodal 2001). Communication scientists and fictional worlds theorists (e.g., Ryan 2001) work with concepts of 'presence' or 'immersion' in depicted worlds and 'involvement' with their inhabitants. Such competing approaches and concepts characterise the entire discussion about affect and emotion in film and media studies, which deal not least with sympathy for characters or empathy with them.⁹ The contradictory conceptions of affective involvement also influence areas of theory related to culture, such as film sociology, cultural studies, or media effects. Here, relations to characters that are connected with social representations are addressed: with ideologies and identity constructions, stereotypes, gender roles, and social positions.

Not all theories can be classified in this simplified typology of psychoanalytical, analytical-philosophical, and scientific-empirical theories with a broad or narrow focus on either textual structures or mental processes, but it already makes the diversity of concepts used in analysis clear. While most theories focus on specific film structures or viewer reactions, some claim to cover the entire spectrum of involvement with characters systematically. Four approaches deserve special mention here because of their differentiation and detail: Elizabeth Cowie's theory of identification (1997), the works on parasocial interaction by Tilo Hartmann, Christoph Klimmt, and Holger Schramm (Hartmann et al. 2004, Klimmt et al. 2006), the 'PEFiC' model of Konijn and Van Hoorn (2003; 2005) and Murray Smith's theory of character engagement (1995).¹⁰ These theories also exemplify the three above paradigms of psychoanalysis (Cowie), scientific empiricism (Schramm, Klimmt, Hartmann, Konijn, Van Hoorn) and analytical philosophy (Smith). A brief comparison of these approaches will show their differences and the requirements for integrative modelling.

9 See Chapter 13 for a more detailed discussion; Bartsch, Eder, and Fahlenbrach 2007 provides an overview.

10 Additional theories deal with involvement with characters in connection with more general accounts of emotions and film reception (esp. Tan 1996; Grodal 1999) or investigate important aspects such as empathy (e.g., Wulff 2003).

Elizabeth Cowie represents a sophisticated variant of the psychoanalytic approach to identification. According to her, involvement focuses on identification, but not primarily with individual protagonists, but with changing positions in the desire scenarios that a film designs as a 'public fantasy' (1997: Chapter 3, 4). As a result, the viewers imaginatively place themselves in the situation of a character in order to assume a position in a structure of desire or wish, of love or recognition: they know the character's desire and want to share it; they want to be desired like the character themselves; or they want to be as desirable as the character is. The basis of all this is 'a wish not to be the other, but to be in his or her position in relation to another figure which is also a figure of desire' (ibid.: 121). According to Cowie, the motivation for this empathetic putting oneself in the place of the character lies more in desire itself than in the promise of its satisfaction (ibid.: 133). Identification with a position is connected with the transfer of emotional memories to other figures of the scenario (ibid.: 113). Cowie's approach has many other interesting facets, but also brings with it difficult problems. From the point of view of cognitive science, the psychoanalytic view of desire as being predominantly formed in early childhood, which Cowie has adopted, is already problematic, as it seems to downplay later stages of individual development, as well as biological and sociocultural factors. But other difficulties lie on a more general level: How do we react to characters that are not involved in structures of desire? What role could other forms of response play that have nothing to do with desire, for example evolutionary fear reactions? Above all, however, the central concept of identification is metaphorically defined as 'putting oneself in the position of a character', but it is never quite clear what this exactly means. More specifically: What mental processes make up this imaginative assumption of a position, and how does the film guide it?

Some media-psychological theories renounce the concept of identification and provide more precise information on the manifold processes of involvement. The basic idea behind theories of parasocial interaction (PSI), which supposedly includes the entire spectrum of involvement, is that our reactions to characters and media personae are similar in many respects to reactions to real people, but that there are also specific differences.¹¹ On an empirical basis, Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm sketched the following model (2006): parasocial interaction is based on the one hand on the appearance, behaviour, conspicuousness, and presence of the characters in the media text; on the other hand on the knowledge and motives of the viewers. The involvement with characters that results from this can be weak or strong and take various cognitive, affective, and behavioural forms. Cognitive processes include focusing attention on the characters, reconstructing their qualities, activating previous media and real-life experiences, developing character-related expectations and appraisals, and establishing

11 See Giles 2000 and the publications of the project 'Parasoziale Interaktionen und Beziehungen: Definition, Modellentwicklung, Messung' (Universität Zürich), for example Hartmann, Schramm, and Klimmt 2004.

relationships between the characters and the viewers' 'self'. The emotional reactions of the audience include empathetic responses, self-centred feelings, and being influenced by the character's moods. In addition, characters trigger physical and linguistic behaviour in the audience (such as facial expressions, gestures, shouts). All these processes can be accompanied by feelings of pleasure, suspense, and entertainment. They may have effects well beyond just watching the film, including the development of longer-term parasocial relationships (PSR), knowledge acquisition, social learning, subliminal priming, and the acceptance of persuasive messages.

This model systematically lists a much broader spectrum of reception processes than Cowie's work, but is, in contrast to it, cautious in its statements about specific responses. This has the advantage of openness, but the disadvantage of low informativity. The so-called PEFiC theory (Konijn and Hoorn 2005; the abbreviation stands for 'perceiving and experiencing fictional characters') makes more specific statements about the connection between character traits, audience dispositions, and emotional reactions. It divides the reception of characters into three phases: encoding, comparison, and responses. During encoding, characters are grasped by the spectators in three ways: they are perceived as morally good or evil with regard to their 'ethics'; as beautiful or ugly with regard to their 'aesthetics'; and as realistic or unrealistic with regard to their 'epistemics'. On this basis, viewers compare the characters with their own self-images, interests, and goals. They register similarities and differences to themselves, relate to their own experiences and concerns, judge the characters according to their own values and thus assign them a certain relevance and valence. During the reaction phase, positive feelings ('involvement') or negative feelings ('distance') arise. The various moral, aesthetic, and realist assessments of a character are weighed against each other, taking into account their relevance, with most characters triggering ambivalent assessments and mixed feelings, according to the authors. The consideration process finally leads to a certain evaluation of the character as a whole, which also depends on whether the balance between involvement and distance reaches a pleasurable level of stimulation. The PEFiC model is based on a concisely condensed, empirically tested theory of involvement; however, it also raises problems, as it is mainly based on audience surveys. To what extent can it also register unconscious reactions and the gradual process of developing sympathy or affection in the course of the film? Is the restriction to the areas of 'ethics', 'aesthetics', and 'epistemics' really convincing, and are these concepts defined precisely enough? But above all: What role does the specific narrative and aesthetic representation of the characters in the media text play in evoking involvement with them?

While psychoanalytical theories of audience responses to characters are too limited to structures of desire and rely on a problematic, metaphorical concept of identification, media psychology approaches remain too general and neglect the role of the audiovisual text. A more conceptually clear and text-aware model of character engagement, to which I referred earlier, was developed by Murray Smith from the

perspective of cognitive film theory and analytical philosophy.¹² Since it has become a classic point of reference in the international discussion, I will describe it in more detail below. Smith rejects the common concepts of identification and focalisation because he considers them unclear and inadequate (1995: 1–5, 93). Drawing on the philosopher Richard Wollheim, he instead differentiates two types of imaginative involvement: in ‘acentral imagination’ we imagine from a neutral, abstract, or general perspective, ‘from outside’, as it were, that a character possesses certain traits or is involved in certain events; for example, that they jump from a high building (Smith 1995: 74–81; 1997: 413). In central imagination, on the other hand, we imagine experiencing the situation ‘from within’ like the character: We imagine looking down, the pull of the void, and the feeling of falling.

Smith argues that in experiencing films the involvement with characters is predominately ‘from outside’—mainly due to the constant change in perspective through editing. For example, most films show various characters from different visual perspectives and make the audience know more (or different things) than any of them. Or, dialogue scenes are frequently edited in shot-reverse-shot patterns so that the audience’s visual perspective alternates between approximating the viewpoint of one speaker and then the other, without ever completely coinciding with either. According to Smith, the reception of film characters is therefore dominated by three processes of ‘acentral imagination’:¹³

- ‘Recognition’ is the perception and understanding of the characters and their enduring qualities (1995: 82). For example, we can observe what Rick Blaine looks like and understand his most important personality traits. (This essentially corresponds to my concept of character synthesis in Chapter 5, except that Smith does not rely on theories of mental modelling.)
- ‘Alignment’ refers to the provision of information about occurrent external and internal experiences of the character (1999: 220). A flashback informs us about Rick’s background and that he felt abandoned by Ilsa.
- ‘Allegiance’ means taking sides emotionally for or against the character, mostly based on moral judgement (*ibid.*). We assess Rick’s moral development positively and therefore like him.

The processes build on each other: We must first recognise a character and their traits in order to understand and follow their experiences; and only on this basis do we make our moral judgements and feel for them. Smith describes this relationship as the ‘structure of sympathy’. Individual reactions of empathy, central imagination,

12 Cf. Smith 1995; 1997; 1999. I would like to thank Murray Smith for kindly commenting on my criticism of his approach. I have attempted to clarify my points of criticism in this revised version of the book.

13 Smith’s discussion is not always clear as to whether he is speaking of the level of text or reception, but it seems that he defines textual structures in relation to their reception.

and feeling with the character are embedded in this overarching structure of external observer reactions, but according to Smith they occur only occasionally in particular phases of the film (cf. 1995: 96–98; 1997). Empathy is understood as an ‘emotional simulation’, as a form of participation in characters ‘from within’, from their perspective, in which viewers experience feelings similar to the character. This can occur intentionally by putting oneself in the character’s place, but also through affective contagion or involuntary body reactions. So maybe after the flashback we feel our way into Rick’s bitter disappointment, or we get infected by Ilsa’s sad facial expression at the end of the film.

Smith’s model of engagement thus combines two approaches that are often represented individually: some assume that we consistently ‘identify’ with characters and share their experiences empathetically, others assume that we react to characters like distanced observers and evaluate them from the outside. Smith integrates both, but strictly separates empathy (central imagining) as feeling *with* characters on the one hand and sympathetic partiality (allegiance, acentral imagining) as feeling *for* characters on the other. Smith attributes the latter almost exclusively to the moral evaluation of the characters, which in turn is based on knowledge of their traits, external situations, and internal experiences.

The aspect that most clearly sets Smith’s approach apart from those outlined above is his concept of alignment, i.e., the way in which films give us cognitive access to the external and internal experiences of characters, ‘aligning’ us with them (cf. Smith 1995: 6, 75, 142–185; 1999: 220). This is an extended process of accompanying and knowing: in the course of the film, we accompany characters through their experiences and learn something about them. According to Smith, this imaginative experience is achieved through two substructures of character-related information: the ‘spatio-temporal attachment’ to a character and the ‘subjective access’ to their inner life. A film can give viewers more or less information about the events characters are involved in, and it can give them more or less access to their thoughts and feelings. Although the two areas are often connected—one learns both what a character does and by way of that also what they think or feel—they are in principle independent of each other (Smith 1995: 143). Spatio-temporal attachment can take various forms. Viewers are either focused on a single character (exclusive attachment) or accompany several characters through space and time (multiple attachment). Multiple attachment usually takes place successively, in *Casablanca* for example through editing that brings different characters to the fore one after the other. But it can also be done simultaneously, for example through splitscreen—you see two people on the phone at separate places—or through voice over—you see one character doing something while another tells of their experiences. In this way, the audience can know more about what is going on in the action and inside the characters than any of them do individually.

With regard to the subjective access to the inner life of the characters, Smith distinguishes between ‘transparent’ characters, about whose psyche one is richly

informed through dialogue, facial expressions, and other cues, and 'opaque' characters, about whose inner life one learns little. Some characters can only be seen acting outwardly, the access to their interior is blocked by underplaying, hiding their faces, or contradictory information (ibid.: 175).¹⁴ According to Smith, the protagonists of many auteur films are rather opaque; in Bresson's *L'Argent* we hardly learn anything about the motives of the anti-hero. The protagonists of mainstream films, on the other hand, are usually transparent. However, the subjective access to a transparent figure only restricts viewers to its perspective if there is no subjective access to other characters (ibid.: 144). In order to determine the viewer's perspective or the narrative perspective of the film as a whole, one must therefore always look at the entire character constellation. Thus, the spectrum of alignment with mainstream characters moves between two poles that are typically associated with certain genres (ibid.: 153). In detective films or in female gothic films like *Rosemary's Baby*, we usually only accompany a single main character to whom we have almost unlimited subjective access. In melodramas, on the other hand, we accompany several transparent characters and know more than each of them through this authorial form of providing information. So, one pole in mainstream film is a strong alignment with the experience of one character, the other a more objective external perspective supplying more extensive knowledge.

If you apply Smith's model to *Casablanca*, the film corresponds more to the melodramatic pattern of alignment, although the characters are by no means completely transparent (see Chapter 6 and Chapter 10). We learn most about Rick's situations and his inner life, but a lot of information is also conveyed about Ilsa's external and internal experiences. The alignment with Renault and Laszlo is weaker, and we only learn the bare essentials about Major Strasser's thoughts and feelings. On the basis of this different knowledge, following Smith, we would now judge the characters according to moral criteria. Because of their character traits, motives, and actions we would develop sympathy for Rick, Ilsa, and Laszlo, but react to the ice-cold Major Strasser with antipathy, and to the trickster Renault with ambivalent, mixed, or changing emotions. Moreover, the film could also lead us to feel empathy with certain characters in significant phases, for example with Rick or Ilsa at their farewell.

Compared to the other three theories, Smith's model is not only more conceptually precise, but also closer to the cinematic text, allowing for more nuanced descriptions of how films elicit different forms of imaginative and emotional responses to characters. I will draw frequently on his important insights. In some respects, however, his approach also raises some difficult problems. In my view, Smith's conceptual dichotomies (central/acentral imagining, empathy/sympathy, alignment/allegiance) enforce overly rigid distinctions between forms of experience that are in fact continuous, gradual, and closely interwoven.¹⁵

14 One might add that in some cases we learn so much about a character's inner life that the action becomes unclear, since the border between inside and outside, reality and hallucinations becomes undecidable, as in *Total Recall* or *Jacob's Ladder*.

15 This strict separation is particularly clear in a central, often cited overview diagram of his model

The first issue is that Smith limits his concepts of recognition and alignment to cognitive and epistemic aspects: the content of perception and the knowledge that viewers gain about characters' traits and their external and internal experiences. Evaluative and affective responses are assigned exclusively to the concept of allegiance and largely reduced to moral judgements. In contrast, it could be argued that processes of understanding and accompanying characters (recognition and alignment) already possess a phenomenological quality and can be experienced in sensory and affective ways. Examples include rhythmic or suspenseful editing of glances or body movements, sudden close-ups through fast camera motion, or the use of mood music and leitmotifs. Related responses can be independent from moral evaluation and transcend merely acquiring knowledge about the characters. It makes a difference not only epistemically, but also phenomenologically, sensually, and affectively, whether one sees characters in long shots or close-ups, hears their voices from near or far. It makes a difference whether images and sounds vividly show what the character is experiencing, whether this is conveyed abstractly through dialogue, or derived from clues. Smith's own nuanced descriptions of alignment techniques indicate such differences (1995: Chapter 5), but he does not explicitly address this sensory-affective level of recognition and alignment.

Secondly, Smith's concept of alignment takes into account only the external perspective of the viewers on the character, but not the diverse potential relationships between viewers' experiences and characters' experiences of the situations depicted. Various forms of alignment can establish very different experiential relations, while providing nearly identical information about the character's inner life. Often, viewers can temporarily and partially approximate, share, or adopt certain aspects of the character's perspective, their perceptions, thoughts, desires or feelings. Sad music can not only communicate that the character is sad, but also evoke slight sadness in viewers, and nervous editing can not only express the character's anxiety, but also induce anxiety in viewers. Such processes are not confined to the rare cases of full empathy described by Smith.

Thirdly, Smith's strict separation between central and acentral imagining, empathy and sympathy, does not, in my opinion, do justice to the gradual transitions and close interconnections between different imaginative and affective responses. It seems more convincing to envisage a continuum between the poles of a close approximation and an extreme divergence between viewers' and characters' perspectives, with various intermediate stances across dimensions of experience (perceptual, epistemic, evaluative, motivational, and affective). In Smith's model (particularly evident in its graphic representation; 1995: 105), central imagination and empathy are disconnected from acentral imagination and the 'structure of sympathy' consisting of recognition,

(Smith 1995: 105). In a later article, Smith (1997) elaborates on his conceptualisation of 'imagining from the inside,' but in my opinion, my following points of criticism also apply to this further developed version of his approach.

alignment, and allegiance. Moreover, acentral imagining seems to encompass an extremely broad range of possible relations between characters' and viewers' perspectives, ranging from maximum distance to relatively close approximation. Such perspectival relations can shift dynamically throughout the narrative, leading to a fluctuating play of approximation and distance to characters, and to overarching patterns of extensive convergence or divergence. All that suggests that these processes, especially alignment and central imagining (empathy), are much closer interconnected than Smith's model implies. For example, certain forms of alignment with a character are likely to foster not only 'acentral' moral allegiance, but also perspective-taking and empathic responses. Again, Smith's own subtle film analyses suggest that he does not exclude such interconnections, but they are missing from his model, which suggests a strict separation.

Lastly, even when viewers' evaluative and affective reactions to characters stem from moral judgements 'from outside' (as in Smith's concept of allegiance), these evaluations and emotions will usually be shaped by the sensuality and affectivity of alignment, as well as by the different perspectival relations between viewers and characters (including central imagining).¹⁶ Even more frequently and strongly than in everyday encounters with real people, allegiance to characters is likely to be infused and influenced by 'identifications' or 'empathies'. In short, the relativity, gradual variability, and phenomenological quality of human experience preclude an understanding of allegiance as entirely 'acentral', a strict separation between central and acentral imagining, and a reduction of recognition and alignment to mere knowledge about the character. The perspectival nature of audience reactions to characters thus requires a more systematic elaboration, going beyond Smith's model. In the following chapters, I will develop some suggestions in this regard. The four theories described above model the involvement with characters in very different ways. If you compare them, you can see some possible links between them and several central questions emerge that will guide my further considerations. Despite all their differences, the approaches have certain similarities: they agree that our affective and emotional response is not only directed at individual protagonists but can alternate between several characters and their contexts. They also agree that more complex processes of involvement are based on fundamental processes of how impressions of characters are formed (character synthesis).

These similarities coincide with my findings about reception (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 5). However, they also reveal a common gap in the four theories. They all only consider affective reactions to characters as represented beings, but not affects and emotions that are caused by their symbolic, symptomatic, or aesthetic qualities.¹⁷

¹⁶ Grodal (2001) and Barratt (2006) point out this problem and offer provisional solutions.

¹⁷ In a later paper, Smith (2011) has expanded his approach so that he considers characters not only as depicted beings, but also as artefacts (he refers to their 'twofoldness' in this regard); however, he does not take into account their dimensions as symbols and symptoms.

They cannot explain emotions such as admiration for Bogart's acting or dismay that the protagonist of *Jud Süß* serves as antisemitic propaganda. Only the PEFiC model includes individual artefact properties under the categories of 'aesthetics' and 'epistemics', but does not allow a clear differentiation between represented being and artefact, for example between an aesthetic assessment of Rick as a 'handsome man' or as an 'effectively staged character played by a star'. Chapters 14 and 16 will address some affective responses to characters as artefacts, symbols, and symptoms. At this point I will concentrate on the aspect of represented beings. Here, the theories differ in relation to three areas in particular: in considering the media text, modelling audience dispositions, and the question of perspective.

The spectator-oriented models of media psychology (PSI, PEFiC) offer a systematic, comprehensive description of character reception. However, they hardly deal with media texts and their structures—and thus with what roles filmic presentation and the distribution of information play in involvement. They make no differentiated statements about the structures in the texts that guide reception, or about the representation of characters; at best they take their diegetic properties into account, but not their form, narration, and aesthetics. They are therefore not useful in types of analysis that begin with the film in order to make statements about probable viewer reactions, for instance, because these are no longer or not yet measurable. But precisely these are often of central importance. After all, film history deals with audiences that no longer exist as such, film production and criticism depend on anticipating the reactions of future viewers, and film interpretation is about intended or ideal reactions. Even in most other analyses time constraints make it impossible to apply the elaborate methods of media psychology, which often provide only results of limited relevance. In all these cases one has to depend on a model of analysis that describes the connection between audiovisual text structures and spectator reactions in a sufficiently differentiated way and thus enables comprehensible, plausibly grounded probability statements, even without questioning large groups of viewers, recording their facial expressions, or measuring physical responses.

Smith and to some extent Cowie offer such text-oriented models; however, these lead to widely divergent results because they are based on different premises about the mental dispositions of viewers. According to Smith, spectators' emotional reactions are based primarily on intersubjective moral norms; according to Cowie, on subjective structures of desire.¹⁸ According to Smith, the basic question in analysing engagement with characters should be: What information does the film convey about their morally relevant characteristics, motives, and actions? According to Cowie, the question should be: Which scenarios of desire does the film create, and which of its positions can viewers identify with?

18 I am emphasising the differences between the approaches here. Smith later relativised his thesis somewhat to account for anti-moral reactions such as pleasure in breaking taboos (1999), but still views moral judgements as dominant. Cowie's theory does include moral assessments, but only indirectly through the spectator's ego ideal.

At least in this trenchant form, both positions have counterintuitive consequences. Since moral norms are intersubjective, Smith is challenged to explain how and why viewers still often react differently to the same character. Cowie, on the other hand, faces the opposite problem: the reactions of heterosexual men and women would almost always have to be fundamentally different; however, centuries of drama and storytelling traditions as well as current empirical studies show that the reactions largely coincide. In certain film genres, the models are strikingly inappropriate: Smith's approach can hardly explain the reactions of porn viewers—moral judgements probably do not play a big role here. Cowie's model would again make it difficult to explain laughing at characters in slapstick comedies or the fear of monsters, since desire scenarios or identification processes seem not to be central there. The two media psychological approaches avoid such problems because they are more open and allow an interplay of different forms of appraisal in which intersubjective norms are interwoven with individual self-concepts, identities, and desires in various ways. It would therefore have to be clarified to what extent viewer reactions to characters are influenced by their non-moral characteristics, such as beauty, strength, power, or humour, as well as by individual factors of the viewer, such as gender, social role, emotional memory, or subjective interests. I will go into this in more detail in Chapter 14.

In this chapter, I will first examine the third set of questions, as it is fundamental to clarifying the first two: the questions of perspective. The two media psychological theories deal neither with the specific perspectives of cinematic representation nor with the perspectivity of spectators' reactions. Cowie's model also remains underdetermined in this regard. Only Smith deals in depth with the question of perspective; however, his strict distinction between acentral and central imagination seems problematic, and in modelling the cinematic distribution of information about characters (recognition and alignment) he downplays its perspectivity.

A prerequisite for solving such problems and for building bridges between disagreeing theories is to clarify the basic concepts of 'perspective', 'identification', and 'empathy'. As ambiguous and controversial as these terms may be, they obviously concern essential aspects of our relationship to characters. Since viewers or filmmakers cannot be expected to do without them, clarifying them also helps to avoid an unnecessary gap between theory and practice. With the terms more clearly defined, I will then show how the two spectatorial attitudes distinguished by Smith—the objective evaluation of characters 'from outside' and the subjective sharing of their experiences 'from inside'—are not strictly separate, but rather represent poles of a continuum. As we will see, this continuum of perspective relations is in turn only one aspect in the complex network of imaginative and affective involvement with the characters.

13.2 Perspective, Identification, Empathy: Conceptual Foundations

There is a broad consensus that our involvement with characters is always linked to perspectives that we have on or share with them. But what is actually meant by 'perspective'? Common encyclopaedias distinguish various meanings of this word and its counterpart 'point of view': viewpoint, vantage point, angle, position, stance, optical appearance, attitude, two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional objects, subjective centre of experience or representation. The concepts of perspective used in film studies range from the spatial point of view of an observer and their mental attitude to the interests of an actor; from the camera's point-of-view shot to narration from a character's point of view to the entire world view of narrators or filmmakers.¹⁹ In addition, questions of perspective are discussed in connection with other technical terms; these concern not only the relationship of viewers to characters ('identification', 'empathy', 'parasocial interaction'), but also to represented worlds ('involvement', 'presence', 'immersion') and narrative instances ('narrative perspective', 'focalisation'). Three views of the concept of perspective are particularly widespread:²⁰

1. System of prerequisites: a first group of theories determines the perspective as (predominantly mental) system of prerequisites or dispositions that characters or narrative instances need to be able to experience or represent the storyworld.²¹ Perspective therefore includes the traits, attitudes, knowledge, values, and perceptive and empathetic abilities of characters or narrators, but not their experience or narration itself.
2. Mode of (re)presentation: in contrast, a second group defines 'perspective' as a way of (visual or narrative) presentation or communication of information in media texts.²² The perceptual or narrative perspective is thus not ascribed to represented beings, but to films or narrative processes, and concerns not least the question of what information they convey about characters and their inner life.

¹⁹ Cf. Stam, Burgoyne, and Flitterman-Lewis 1992: 84; Chatman 1986: 190ff.

²⁰ Most of the following definitions come from narratology. Van Peer and Chatman 2001 provides a bibliography with a focus on literary studies.

²¹ Carola Surkamp (1998: 420) defines 'perspective' in accordance with Nünning and Pfister as 'the spectrum of traits, the individual view on reality, and the [...] fictional set of prerequisite properties of a character or narrator'. Schneider (2000: 409) also uses this definition. Schmid (2001) understands 'perspective' as 'a bundle of internally and externally determined conditions that are bound to a particular standpoint and used for grasping and depicting an action'. Van Peer and Chatman define perspective as 'the location [in a broad sense] from which events in a story are presented to the reader' (2001: 5). These definitions can be subsumed under the concept of a system of prerequisites or dispositions (cf. Rusch 1998: 555).

²² Thus, Borstnar, Pabst, and Wulff see 'narrative point of view' as 'the amount and way in which information is provided in a film in relation to the recipients' (2002: 165f.). This understanding draws on Bordwell's conception of point of view and his differentiation between knowledge, communicativeness, self-consciousness, and judgement (1985: 57ff.).

3. System of individual perspectives: a third group starts from an ambiguity of the concept of perspective and assumes that an overarching perspective in the text or reception results from the relationships between different character and narrative perspectives (in the sense of points one and two).²³ Thus, in speaking of perspectives, it is necessary to specify whose perspective and at what level of narration.

The perspective of the viewer is only indirectly considered in these definitions, but seems to be related to and influenced by the perspectives of characters, narrators or texts. How complex these connections are and which further facets of the concept of perspective they encompass becomes clear from some examples of the use of the terms. For example, a film analysis might say: 'In *Lady in the Lake*, the camera takes the perspective of the detective Marlowe'. The film is notable for its use of a subjective camera that consistently shows the protagonist's way of seeing; the audience sees what he sees from the same visual perspective. Since they also hear the same things he does, one could speak more generally of a shared perceptual perspective. In the next example, however, this is not what is meant: '*C'est arrivé près de chez vous* makes the audience share the perspective of a mass murderer who is accompanied by a television crew that treats him like a star'. Here, we rather share the visual perspective with the cameraman of the television crew than with the murderer. Sharing his perspective could mean three things: that he is the focus of the story; that we experience essentially the same thing as he does, albeit in a different perceptual way; or that his sociopathic tendencies are to be made understandable to us. The latter can also be more explicitly suggested: '*Halloween* forces upon the viewer the sadistic perspective of the maniacal killer as he attacks his victims'. Here it is assumed that by perceiving the character we simultaneously adopt his sadistic interests, values, and emotions. Yet another kind of coupling of perspectives is found in the following case: '*Sunset Boulevard* is told from the perspective of a dead man: the murdered screenwriter swims in the pool and tells how it happened'. Here it is important that the first-person narrator and protagonist, the dead screenwriter, presents, comments on, and evaluates his story in a certain way.

The comparison of these definitions and examples shows that there is agreement on only one point: the central objects at which the perspective is directed are the depicted world, which includes its inhabitants, events and other elements. However, there is disagreement about the following questions:

23 Borstnar, Pabst and Wulff view 'narrative point of view' as just a part of a larger formation of perspective that together with 'optical point of view' makes it possible to reconstruct an overall, judgemental 'perspective of the text' (2002: 176). On the other hand, Branigan defines 'narrative point of view' as a higher-level relationship of various levels of narration involving narrative agents and focalisation by characters (1992: Chapter 4, 115). For Grimm, 'point of view' is the 'sum that results out of the order and relations between individual point of view structures' as a 'programme of focalisation' (1996: 47).

- What exactly is perspective? A spatio-temporal location, a mode of perception, a value, a set of interests or emotions, a system of presuppositions, a degree of presence, a mode of representation, or a relationship between such aspects?
- To whom can a perspective be attributed? Characters, narrators, spectators, filmmakers, the camera, the narration, the film as a whole?
- How are the perspectives of the different instances connected?

Despite the confusing ambiguity of the concept of perspective, the proposal to replace it with more specific terms (e.g., Chatman 1986) has not been successful. Its clarification is therefore urgently needed. In what follows, I will develop my own proposal, based mainly on cognitive film theory and the philosophy of mind. I will try to show that the multiplicity of meanings of ‘perspective’ can be traced back to a common core: to mental perspective as a specific being-given of intentional objects of consciousness, or in other words, a way of experiencing them.

Mental and Medial Perspectives

In philosophy, perspective is mainly examined as a mental phenomenon. It is surprising that established philosophical dictionaries such as the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* do not contain a systematic definition of the term. However, clues can be obtained from the analytical and phenomenological philosophy of mind, which treats perspective indirectly. Thomas Metzinger writes in his book *Subjekt und Selbstmodell* (‘Subject and Self-Model’):

‘Perspectivity’ is initially [...] no more than a metaphorical borrowing from the phenomenology of the visual sense: our visual experience of the environment is built around a centre [...] What applies to the structural construction of the visual field and the visual model of reality also applies in a broader sense to our phenomenal space as a whole: Our entire consciousness is built around a centre because it is a centred consciousness. This inescapable centre of our inner experience space is the phenomenal self, the subject of psychological states. (Metzinger 1999: 9)

In this understanding of the concept, the basic structure of visual perspective is transferred to the phenomenal space of consciousness as a whole: all processes of consciousness seem to emanate from a centre. Metzinger explains this impression in that the mental representations of the human being not only possess a specific form, degree of consciousness, and quality of experience, but are also linked to a mental self-representation. Like a flight simulator, our brain designs ‘world models’ in which a ‘self-model’ is embedded, comparable to a small red arrow with the remark: ‘You are here’ (ibid.: 241–45). This self-model, anchored in the subliminal bodily self-awareness (proprioception), centres the overall states of representation, which ‘appear on the level of inner experience as the perspective of phenomenal consciousness’ (ibid.: 205).

Metzinger does not define what a perspective is, but his argument suggests that he understands it as something like the specific relationship between a centre of consciousness (or self-model) and a mentally represented world. This implicit definition recalls the first of the already mentioned narratological definitions, which determines perspective as a place or a system of mental prerequisites of characters, narrators, or other represented beings. But Metzinger's implicit definition differs from such definitions in one essential respect: the perspective itself is not seen as a place or a system of prerequisites, but as something that results from them. This is also indicated by the original meaning of 'perspective' in Latin: 'per-spicere' means 'looking through' (in contrast to 'point of view'). The term perspective thus implicitly expresses a relationship: it is said that someone has a certain perspective on something; and this means that the person concerned is in a certain relationship to that something. Such a relationship presupposes a mental or spatio-temporal 'place' without collapsing with it. For example, you have an optical perspective on something from a place, but the perspective is not the place itself.²⁴

Thus, a mental perspective is neither a place nor a system of prerequisites. Rather, it seems to be a certain relationship to objects of consciousness. This relationship can be described in more detail with the help of philosophical theories on the 'intentionality' (object-relatedness) of consciousness. Philosophers like Husserl (1993) or Searle (1983) say that intentional processes of consciousness have a certain structure. Firstly, they belong to a certain *type* of mental processes: perceiving, thinking, feeling, wanting, etc. Secondly, they are directed at certain *objects*: something is perceived, thought, felt, wanted. ('Object' is to be understood here in a broad sense: the 'intentional objects' of consciousness do not have to exist, but only have to be represented mentally; they can therefore be all kinds of depicted or imagined, real or fictional, concrete or abstract objects, people, characters, immaterial ideas, or complex events.) Thirdly, processes of consciousness have a certain *content*, that is, the objects are represented in a certain form. One perceives something as something in a particular way. In addition, intentional processes exhibit degrees of attention and experiential qualities (*qualia*)—the sensation of redness, coldness, melancholy—and can involve various representations and references to self-models.

On this basis, I propose the following working definition:

The mental perspective is the specific way in which intentional objects of mental processes are represented in a mind.

24 A place can be defined by a single term, but relations involve at least two terms. That someone is at a particular place at a particular time is a causal prerequisite for a perceptual perspective, but not for any of the other mental forms of perspective. Surprisingly, though, perspective is sometimes defined as a place (Chatman and van Peer 2001: 5) and 'point of view' as a relationship of representation (Branigan 1992).

One could also say: it is the mental relationship of a conscious being to the intentional objects of its mental processes and states; or: the specific experiential form or givenness of objects of consciousness. A similar understanding is encountered—albeit often implicitly or with different terminology—in narratology and practical storytelling. As the screenplay program *Dramatica* says: ‘An author’s argument must go beyond telling audience members what to look at. It must also show them how to see it. It is the relationship between object and observer that creates perspective, and in stories, perspective creates meaning’ (Phillips and Huntley 1999). Mieke Bal uses the term ‘focalisation’ in a similar meaning when defining it as ‘the relation between the vision and that which is *seen*, perceived’ (2002: 142; emphasis in orig.). In my opinion, focalisation can be better understood as the *creation* of such relationships of perspective through media texts (see below), but the basic idea is the same: it is about the mental relationship to intentional objects.

This abstract clarification of the concept of perspective has concrete consequences for the analysis of involvement with characters and for the understanding of media communication as a whole. First of all, the question of which instances have a perspective at all can now be answered in regard to mental perspective. All beings capable of consciousness who are involved in communication (producers and recipients) or those who are constructed by acts of representation (narrators and characters) can be attributed mental processes, for example perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that are directed at the represented world.²⁵ This means that they can all be assigned a mental perspective on the represented world.

For example, the viewers of *Casablanca* have a mental perspective on the characters, objects, events, abstract ideas, and laws of the fictional world, which they construct imaginatively and in which they are engaged by perceiving, thinking, associating, judging, and feeling. They react cognitively and emotionally to Rick, Ilsa, their love and parting, their environment and its rules. When these objects are present in the working memory, the audience takes a certain mental perspective on them. In the case of viewers and filmmakers, the attribution of such perspectives can be based on production and reception documents, observation of oneself and others, empirical studies and surveys, as well as assessments of the intended or ideal experience. In the case of characters and narrators, it is based on textual clues.

If one ascribes mental perspectives to real authors and recipients as well as fictional narrators and characters in the analysis, the question arises how these perspectives relate to each other and how one can compare them. Here, too, the concept of the mental perspective offers suitable clues. In principle, it emphasises the fact that, unlike characters, viewers also react to a whole series of things that do not belong to the represented (fictional) world, but to other levels of communication; for example to themselves and the

25 Parts I and II of this book showed that during reception we develop mental models of characters as conscious beings on the basis of textual signals of subjectivity. We develop images of fictional characters and narrators, but also of real filmmakers and spectators, make inferences about their inner life, and attribute object-related experiences to them.

people sitting around them in the cinema, to the film's images and sounds, to the elegant découpage of the scenes, Bogey's change of image, the overarching theme of integrity, the political intentions of the filmmakers, and so on. Except in self-reflexive films, only the audience—and not characters or narrators—has a perspective on these objects of consciousness, and thus also on characters as artefacts, symbols, and symptoms.

However, spectator, narrator, and character perspectives on the depicted world can be compared with each other. Most existing theories have only done that in two respects: knowledge and perception. For example, they have claimed that viewers of Hollywood films often share the view of male protagonists on their female objects of desire, or that suspense is created when viewers know more than the unsuspecting characters threatened by danger. However, to analyse involvement it is crucial to see that the mental perspective does not only concern perception and knowledge, but the entire spectrum of mental processes. If one refers to the structure of consciousness described in Chapter 6, at least five types of mental perspective can be distinguished:²⁶

1. Perceptual perspective: What does a person perceive at a certain point in time and in what way? And what do they imagine in a vivid, perceptual way? For example: Rick recalls his time in Paris with Ilsa in a flashback, and we see the content of his memory. However, this realm of perspective includes further forms of perceptual and imaginative experiences, such as hearing, smelling, feeling, dreaming, fantasising, or hallucinating. Perceptual and imaginative perspectives can thus be subdivided into optical, acoustic, olfactory, tactile, and so on.
2. Epistemic perspective: What does the person think, know, believe or judge about the object at this point in time, e.g., about themselves, other beings, events, or past history? This area includes all forms of thinking, believing and questioning, from higher forms of reflection and self-knowledge to lack of knowledge or false beliefs. Rick does not know why Ilsa left him and apparently assumes it was selfishness, while we already suspect he is mistaken.
3. Evaluative perspective: How does the person evaluate the object in aesthetic, moral, or other respects? Because of his misconception of Ilsa, Rick condemns her at first, while we take a positive view and consider his reaction premature.
4. Affective perspective: Which emotions, feelings, sensations, or moods does the object evoke in the person (see Chapter 13)? At first Rick seems to feel a mixture of reproachful hurt and ongoing love towards Ilsa; most viewers will feel something else for her, maybe compassion.

26 Evaluation, subsumed under motivation there, is listed separately here, since it plays an important role in affective involvement. Comparable distinctions can be found in Ryan 1991; Doležel 1998; Gaut 1999.

5. Motivational (conative) perspective: What does the person wish or want in regard to the object? What are their needs, interests, goals, and plans? This area covers the various aspects of motivation (see Chapter 9). Rick first wants to get revenge on Ilsa, to humiliate her; but we hope for a reconciliation between the two.

Since every experience is embedded in a network of further processes of consciousness, the different types of perspective are loosely connected. For example, when you perceive something, you usually also acquire knowledge about it. The perspective of perception is therefore often linked to a particular perspective of knowledge, and knowledge in turn can evoke certain judgements, wishes, and feelings. The mental perspective also changes and develops along with the experiences and their objects. Both are important for the analysis of response to characters.

The five types of perspective can be attributed to all real or represented beings—producers, recipients, narrators, and characters. The perspectives of the spectators and the characters are decisive for the analysis of involvement. For *Casablanca*, for example, one could investigate how Rick sees Ilsa and how the audience sees her; what Rick thinks and knows about her and what the audience thinks and knows about her; what judgements, desires, and interests Rick has regarding Ilsa and what the audience has; what Rick feels for Ilsa and what the audience feels. In each of these respects, the mental perspective also concerns the form and quality of experience of the relationship to the object: perception, thinking, evaluation, desire, and feeling have different sensual concreteness, intensity, and valence.

In his famous essay 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?' (1974), the philosopher Thomas Nagel points out that subjective perspective is an irreducible aspect of all experience that cannot be grasped by purely scientific descriptions of the mental. When trying to understand the experiences of others, each being ultimately remains limited to the resources of its own consciousness. How bats experience the world as small flying animals with echo sounding is unimaginable for humans. Ultimately, the subjective qualities of experience (*qualia*) of other people are only comprehensible to the extent that they are similar to our own.

Media try to counter against this fact by bringing us closer to the subjective perspective and experience of other beings; they are truly *qualia* machines. The talk of 'identifying' with characters is a sign of this. Fictional media communication moves between two poles. On the one hand, audiovisual media are perceived as 'mock-up of social behaviour' for the eye, ear, and brain (Schwender 2001: 129). Perceptual images and sounds turn recipients into external observers of represented characters and events, which they capture similarly to reality. On the other hand, media are understood as 'means by which experiences can be communicated' (Vogel 2001: 292). They enable recipients to (partly) reproduce (certain aspects of) the inner experiences of media makers or characters within themselves. These two determinations of media use are

not mutually exclusive, but rather set different accents within a spectrum that allows both a focus on represented worlds and on communicative intentions, representation of both outer and inner worlds, external observation and mental simulation.

Nagel made another decisive observation (1991): our perspective on objects of consciousness can be more or less subjective or objective (intersubjective). People mostly take a subjective perspective that is shaped by their personal situations, dispositions, opinions, values, feelings, and experiences. But we are also able to detach ourselves from these individual aspects and to abstract from them, to take a more general perspective, to understand, consider, and evaluate objects of consciousness in a more objective way. In cases of a perceptual illusion, for example, we can make it clear to ourselves that we are wrong. Morally, we can realise that our scathing judgement of another person arises from our personal antipathy and is inappropriate. Our entire life, which subjectively means so much to us, can be viewed from a distanced perspective as one among many, as irrelevant or absurd. Such insights also allow us to influence our feelings and desires to make them seem more fitting. We can transform anger to understanding, murderous desires to the need to talk, stubbornness to openness.

Smith's previously discussed distinction between central and acentral imagination also fits into the spectrum of subjective and objective perspectives: We can vividly imagine 'from the inside' what it is like to jump from a high building (subjective perspective); but we can also grasp the abstract idea that someone jumps from a high building without imagining concrete experiences (objective perspective). In contrast to Smith's separation between central and acentral imagination, however, Nagel's works make it clear that we are not dealing with an either-or, but with a more-or-less, with a continuum between the poles of subjectivity and objectivity, which also applies to mental processes of various kinds. Objective perspectives often require a more or less active externalisation, distancing, or abstraction, but can also be pre-formed and habitualised through internal and external uses of signs, for example through linguistic-propositional forms of thinking.

The proposed concept of the mental perspective allows not only gradual transitions between subjectivity and objectivity and between similarity and difference of perspectives, but also between their specificity and generality. Thus, one can examine not only individual mental processes, such as Rick's momentary perceptions, in detail, but also his overarching world view. Temporally, the perspective can be related to fleeting moments or permanent states; one can examine individual shots or sequences or the whole film. The intentional objects can also be described in more or less detail: Rick's or the audience's reactions can be to Ilsa's smile or to her entire situation.

The preliminary results can be summarised as follows: in film analysis, a mental perspective can in principle be assigned to every fictional or real being within film communication. Viewers, filmmakers, narrators, and characters relate to specific

objects in a specific way through their perception, thinking, evaluation, wishes, and affects at a specific time. Their perspectives can be more or less subjective or objective, concrete, or abstract, and they can be described in more detail and compared with each other in terms of object, type of experience, reference to time, form, and quality of experience. Different degrees and aspects of similarity or difference are possible.

However, the concept of the mental perspective is not the only concept of perspective that is important in analysing characters. At the beginning I sketched three common views of perspective: as a system of mental dispositions, as a mode of representation, or as a structure of individual perspectives (in the first and second sense). The first of these views has now proven to be unconvincing: the mental perspective is grounded in the subject's mental dispositions, but should not be confused with them. Ilsa would not see Rick if she were blind, but it is not her vision, but her specific view of Rick, that defines her perspective. But what about the second definition of perspective as a media phenomenon, as a mode of representation? The proposals are differentiated. Thus Borstnar, Pabst, and Wulff define 'point of view' as 'the type and scope of the distribution of information in the film with regard to the recipient', or more precisely: as a quantitative distribution of information among the characters and a qualitative closeness to their experiences (2002: 165f.). According to them, this 'narrative point of view' together with the 'optical point of view' of the camera forms the basis for a comprehensive, judgemental 'text perspective' (ibid.: 176). David Bordwell takes a similar approach, but proposes to limit the term 'point of view' to visual representation and to cover the remaining meanings of the term by differentiating between the scope of knowledge, communicativeness, conspicuousness, and value of narration (1985a: 57ff.).²⁷

Common to these approaches is that they do not assign the perspective to filmmakers, narrators, characters, or viewers, i.e., to conscious beings, but to inanimate communication instruments such as the camera, the film, or the media text, or to communication processes such as narration or the distribution of information. This indicates that perspective is not only a characteristic of mental, but also of media representation and intentionality. Through mental processes, objects are represented internally in a mental perspective; through texts or semiotic processes, they are represented externally and intersubjectively in a representational perspective.²⁸ The

27 According to Bordwell, narration shows a particular degree of 'knowledgeability' about actions and characters, firstly as a 'range' of knowledge, i.e., the relationship between the information provided and what the characters know, and secondly as 'depth' of knowledge about the inner life of the characters. Narration does not necessarily pass on its knowledge to the spectators, but can have varying degrees of 'communicativeness' and for instance withhold information. In addition, it is characterised by how noticeably it addresses the viewer ('self-consciousness'), for example through explicit commentary as well as its attitude toward characters or the viewers ('judgemental factors' such as evaluations, ironic music, or the general narrative strategy).

28 Internal and external representation, media and mental perspectives are not identical. Thus, Rick is shown from a fixed optical perspective in the film's images, but how the spectators view these

phenomena concerned can be summarised under the concept of the *perspective of media representation* (alternatively: media, textual, semiotic, or representational perspective) and can be distinguished from the mental perspective. (I am avoiding the more common term, narrative perspective, because not only narrative media texts involve perspectives in this.)

However, the concept of the perspective of representation is derived from and presupposes that of the mental perspective. Philosophers like John Searle point out that semiotic intentionality is based on mental intentionality: ‘meaning is a form of derived intentionality’ (1998: 141). The first part of this book has shown that external representations are determined by their function in reception; the perspective of the medial presentation can therefore ultimately be traced back to the intended or ideal perspective of the audience.²⁹ On closer inspection, neither statements about media perspectives nor about the way information is provided can be understood without recourse to mental perspectives. When it is said that the camera takes the optical perspective of a character, that narration conveys the evaluative perspective of a narrator, or that the film imposes the ideological perspective of the filmmaker on the viewer, the reference to a real or imagined consciousness is obvious. This reference is already implicitly contained in the assumption that films evoke perspectival processes of reception in viewers, including the formation of character models, in an intersubjective way. The conspicuously metaphorical formulations of some theories can be explained in this way. When Bordwell, for example, speaks of ‘narration’—an abstract process of conveying information—having a certain ‘knowledge’ (1985: 57ff.), the point is actually that viewers are supposed to acquire a certain knowledge. Statements about media perspectives therefore depend on statements about mental perspectives of producers or recipients; media perspectives are grounded in mental perspectives.

In this indirect sense, a perspective can also be assigned to a film, camera, narration, or the provision of information. At the same time, various forms of objectification of subjective perspectives are connected with them. A film can evoke perspectives in viewers, represent perspectives of characters, and express perspectives of filmmakers or narrators. The flashback in *Casablanca*, for example, represents Rick’s memory of his Parisian time with Ilsa, gives viewers an optical view of what Rick remembers and a certain knowledge about it, and at the same time implicitly asks us to understand Rick’s bitter egocentricity as justified by the loss of his great love.

images varies according to their position, attention, vision, eye movements, mental capabilities, etc. The differences between viewers’ subjective perspectives become even greater on the more complex levels of creating character models, particularly in regard to judgements, wishes, and feelings.

29 Pfister appears to assume that, as well, when he speaks of the ‘authorially intended reception perspective’ (1988: Chapter 3.5)

Perspective Structures and Relationships

It has become clear that film characters are embedded in a network of different perspectives. Filmmakers, narrators, characters, and viewers all have their own mental perspectives on the depicted world and its inhabitants, representing them mentally in certain ways. Films, camera work, and narrative processes have certain representational perspectives on the storyworld, they represent it medially in specific ways. If one wants to understand involvement with characters, one has to consider the relationships between these different perspectives.

A well-known example that focuses on the relationship between the perspective of the characters and that of the (intended) audience may show this.³⁰ At the beginning of Spielberg's *Jaws*, a happy young woman goes swimming at night. In contrast to her, genre-savvy spectators already suspect that a murderous shark is about to attack. We know about the girl's situation and her ignorance. With the differences in knowledge between us and the character, the affective perspectives also diverge: while the girl is exuberant, we fear for her—suspense arises. After several shots showing us swimmers from above the water, we are suddenly given an underwater perspective and hear the shark's threatening musical leitmotif, thereby understanding that we now share the attacking shark's view. Some analyses assume that we also approach the motivational and emotional perspective of the shark, so that we feel sadistic lust with its attack on the struggling legs of the woman. But seems more convincing that the shark feels hungry, and we, on the other hand, fearful expectation. Above water we see the screaming woman being torn away by the shark. We do not share her perceptions, but the perspectives of knowledge converge: she now understands that she was grabbed by a shark. At the same time, we approach some of her feelings and wishes. We may also feel horror and, like her, wish that she could escape from the shark. Unlike the girl, however, we feel neither fear of death nor pain. So our mental perspective is different from both the shark's and its victim's. In this scene, the differences between character and spectator perspectives serve, among other things, to give the viewers more knowledge than the girl has, to conceal the shark, to increase the suspense, to focus on affective triggers (e.g., facial expressions), and to create an experience in which we are highly aware of the danger without being able to stop it. The following will attempt to gain a better understanding of such and other, more complex relationships of perspectives.

30 The example originally seems to have come from Noël Carroll; cf. Gaut 1999: 207.

	The subject of a perspective...	...represents a certain object...	...in a certain way...	...and has a certain relationship...	...to other subjects and their perspectives
Mental perspective	Filmmaker, narrator, character, viewer	character, object, state, event, thoughts, laws,...	mentally by perception, reasoning, evaluation, wish, affect, each with a particular experiential quality; communicatively through acts of communication, narration, representation	presence, similarity, hierarchy; knowledge, imitation, simulation,...	filmmaker, narrative instance, character, viewers; film as text, narration, camera
Medial perspective	Film as text, narration, camera	character, object, state, event, thoughts, laws,...	medially / semiotically by representing, narrating, recording	communication, narration, representation,...	filmmaker, narrator, character, viewers

Table 10 The matrix of relationships between the mental perspectives of creators, narrators, characters, and recipients, as well as the media (or textual) perspective

For this purpose, it makes sense first to give a condensed overview of the systematic relationships among perspectives (Table 10). Their general matrix is: *the subject of a perspective represents a certain object in a certain way (in a certain perspective) and thus has a certain relationship to other subjects (and their perspectives)*.

This set contains several variables.³¹ The objects of perspective can be all elements of the depicted world, especially characters, their inner life, and their situations—like sharks and their attacks, swimmers, and fear of death. Different subjects can have a perspective on these objects: spectators, characters, narrators, and filmmakers. In the example, the latter two do not play a major role in involvement, since it is more important how the spectators and the swimmers view the shark. The subjects relate to the objects in different ways through qualitative acts of perception/imagination, thinking, evaluation, wishing, and feeling—that is their perspective. In each of these aspects, their perspectives can be put in certain relations to each other. Various conditions are of importance, especially the following:

- Narration, communication, representation: How do films, filmmakers, and

31 In order to avoid unnecessary complication, I am limiting the discussion here to mental perspectives.

narrators represent the perspective of characters? Do they imitate their perspective in the depiction? In the *Jaws* example, neither filmmakers nor narrators are conspicuous, the audience's involvement should apparently be focused as directly as possible on the characters.

- Presence and knowledge: How much do viewers (and narrators) know about the perspective of the characters (and narrators)? How much attention do viewers pay to the perspectives of certain characters and narrators? Both the perspective of the girl and that of the shark are accessible to us and attract our attention.
- Subjectivity, authority, and reliability: How subjective or objective are the perspectives (in Nagel's sense)? How credible and reliable are the perspectives of narrators and characters? Which serve as guidelines for the audience? We immediately realise that the swimmer misjudged her situation.
- Similarities and differences: In what ways are the perspectives of filmmakers, narrators, viewers, and characters similar or different? Are they congruent, do they agree with each other? Are they discrepant, are they contrasting? The perspectives of spectators, girls, and sharks differ considerably; the shark wants to eat the girl, who of course has a different opinion about that.
- Simulation, perspective-taking, distancing: To what extent do viewers, narrators, and characters adopt the perspectives of others or simulate them? To what extent do they reject the perspectives of others, distance themselves from them? We take on the shark's view, but are given no choice about it. Emotionally, it is more likely that we put ourselves in the girl's place and imagine what it would be like if we were attacked by a shark ourselves (coastal towns in the US complained about a bad tourist season after the film's release).

Thus, the relationships between different subjects of perspective can be very different, especially those between characters and spectators, which are most important for audience involvement. The overall network of individual perspectives and their relationships within a film is sometimes itself called the 'perspective' or 'point of view' of the film (this corresponds approximately to the third definition of perspective described above). Less misleading, however, is the concept of *perspective structure* from theatre studies, which I am adopting here in a slightly modified form.³² By the perspective structure of a

32 Cf. Pfister 1988: Chapter 3.5; Surkamp 2005. The concept was adopted for film studies by Lohmeier (1996: Chapter VI), and resembles Edward Branigan's idea of 'narrative point of view' as the relationship between levels of 'narration' understood as media and mental representation of events (1992: Chapter 4, 115). My modified use of the term builds on Branigan and the concept of mental perspective discussed thus far.

media text I understand the totality of the relationships between the mental perspectives that producers, recipients, narrators, and characters have on the represented world and its elements. Since these relationships change in the course of the film, the perspective structure can be described for certain phases or for the entire film.

The system of perspective terms can now be summarised as follows (Diagram 28). The term 'perspective' can mean three different things in the current discussion:

1. The *mental perspective* in the sense of the mode of experience or givenness of certain objects of consciousness forms the systematic core of the conceptual field.
2. The *perspective of representation* is derived from the mental perspective of the filmmakers or the ideal recipients: the way the depicted world is represented through texts and their strategies of providing information (see Chapter 7 and Chapter 8).
3. Analysis makes use of the representational perspective to determine the relationships between the mental perspectives of filmmakers, narrators, characters, and viewers, such as relationships of mediation, knowledge, authority, similarity, or simulation. The overall system of such relationships among perspectives can be described as the film's *perspective structure*.

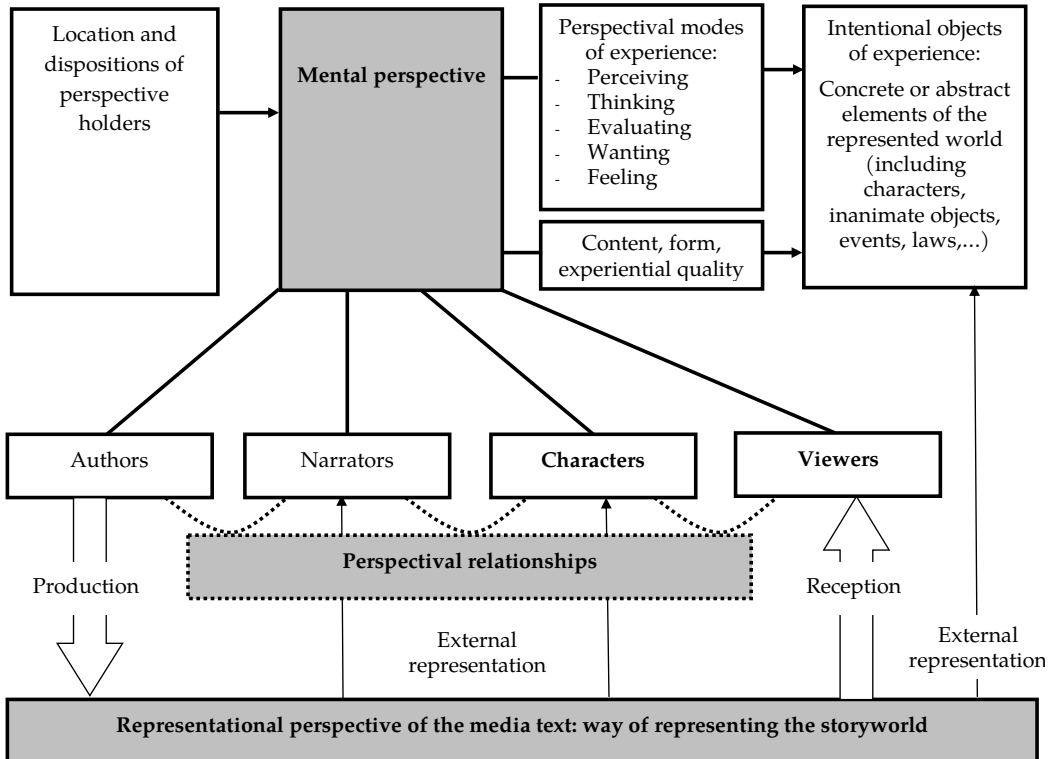


Diagram 28 The system of perspectives in narrative films and other media

This systematic conceptual framework forms the basis for the following more concrete considerations. It links different concepts of perspective and thus brings different theories together. Above all, however, it makes it possible to examine involvement in characters more closely. Of particular importance are the viewers' perspective on characters, the relationship between viewer and character perspectives, and the influence of narrative instances. The rest of this chapter deals with these aspects and the cinematic devices used.

13.3 Perspectives *on* and *with* Characters

Our imaginative and affective involvement with characters is shaped by two basic kinds of perspectivity. First, we have certain perspectives *on* characters, their external experiences and their inner lives through our perception, knowledge, evaluation, volition, and emotions. Second, our own perspectives on the characters and the depicted world stand in certain *relations* to the perspectives of the characters themselves. Few theories capture this dual quality of perspectives.

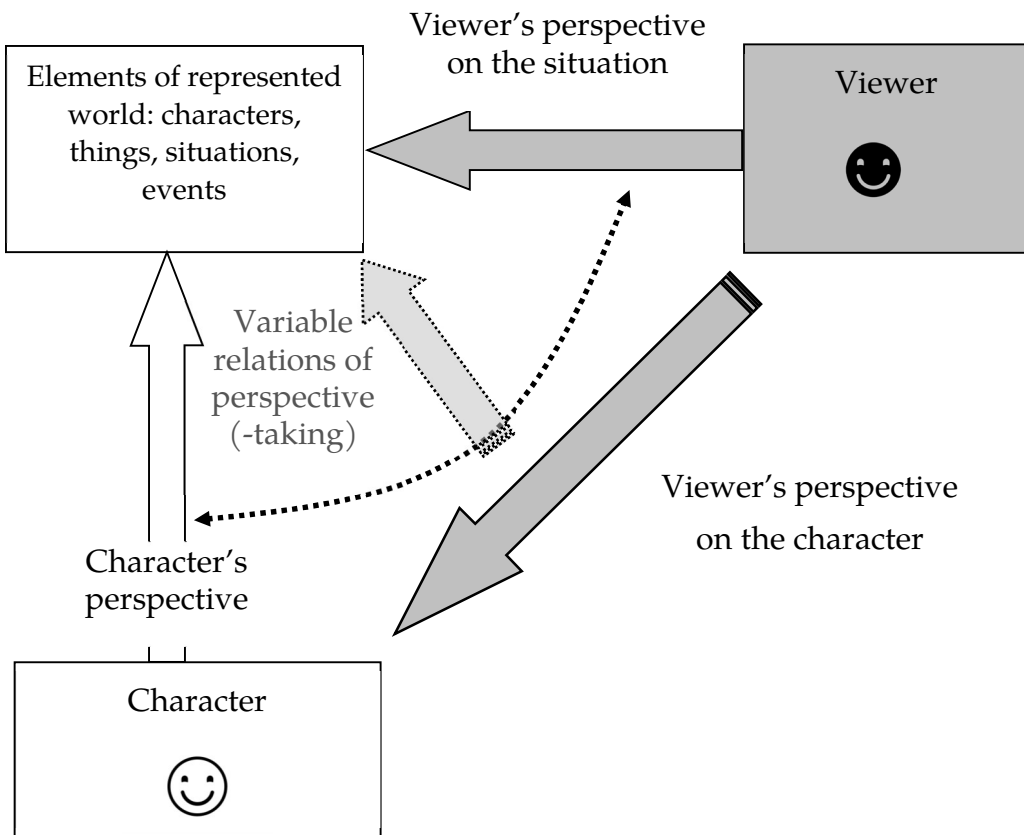


Diagram 29 The audience's dual perspective on the character and the represented situation and its relationship to the character's perspective on the situation

Diagram 29 illustrates how we can become more or less close to a character in both ways (an observation that will play a crucial role at the end of this chapter). Let us first look at the *perspective of the spectators on the character*. Among other things, it depends on how much attention they pay to the character, what knowledge they have about him and how important and reliable they consider certain information about him to be. In addition, their perspective on the character depends on how concrete or abstract, crude or detailed, individualised or typified their mental model of the character is (see Chapter 8). Furthermore, a vivid impression of spatial proximity or distance can be conveyed through cinematic devices such as shot sizes—from long shots to close-ups—or the spatial quality of the sound design. The *relationships between the spectators' perspective and the character's perspective* are also variable. They are determined by varying degrees of congruence between the way the spectators, on the one hand, and the character themselves, on the other, perceive, understand, evaluate and affectively react to their external situations, their inner lives, other characters and objects in the depicted world.

A brief look at *Casablanca's* famous farewell scene, which I will expand on in Chapter 14, illustrates this connection and shows that the various aspects of perspective develop largely independently of one another. The scene takes place at the airport at night. It is about Rick and Ilsa saying goodbye to each other after he tells her that she will have to flee with her husband, and he will stay behind. Rick and Ilsa stand close to each other and exchange intense looks and words. We perceive the same situation as they do, but our *visual perspective* differs from theirs and changes, while theirs remain the same. At first, we see the lovers together in a two-shot taken from the side; they, on the other hand, view each other quite closely and from the front. A series of over-the-shoulder shots and reverse shots changes our perspective, so that it alternately approaches Rick's and Ilsa's views. Through the series of shots, however, we see the facial expressions of both characters, i.e., more than they themselves. Compared to this changing visual perspective, our *acoustic* perception remains relatively constant. Like Ilsa and Rick, we hear their dialogue clearly from close up and thus witness a private moment between them—in contrast to Ilsa's husband. Unlike Rick and Ilsa, however, we also hear the musical leitmotif 'As Time Goes By'. This perspective of perception influences the *epistemic* perspective, our knowledge and thoughts about the situation of separation. Based on the music, dialogue, and facial expressions of Ilsa and Rick, we know something about what is going on in them, but they themselves are presumably better informed about their thoughts and feelings. Our knowledge of the situation comes closer to the surprised Ilsa than Rick: like her, we only now learn of his renunciation and its reasons. Unlike her, however, we may be prepared for this through media-specific prior knowledge (about narrative patterns, the Production Code, star images). While we come closer to Ilsa than Rick in terms of knowledge, it is the other way around in terms of the *perspective of judgement*. Ilsa spontaneously sees Rick's renunciation as negative, she

reacts desperately; Rick, on the other hand, presents his renunciation as a morally positive and unavoidable sacrifice, and we are to join him in this assessment. Although judgements are closely related to wishes and feelings, this does not mean that we also share Rick's *perspective of volition and emotion*. Unlike him and Ilsa, we are not directly affected by the situation. While Ilsa shows stunned despair and Rick shows seriousness, the narrative context, music, and visual atmosphere promote compassion and feelings of pleasant melancholy, activate nostalgic memories instead of intensive feelings of separation. We can also feel relief and satisfaction at the successful ending of the storytelling. In the same scene we approach two different characters in different ways, and our relationships of perception, cognition, evaluation, volition, and emotion develop relatively independently of each other. This is due to the fact that, unlike the characters, we do not react exclusively to the world depicted, but additionally to non-diegetic influences.

If we look more generally at the relationship between the perspective of the spectator and the perspective of the character, we can distinguish at least five general degrees of closeness: (1) Ignorance: in some cases, the perspective of the character remains unrecognisable to us. We do not know why the man at the beginning of *Un chien andalou* slits the woman's eye open and why she calmly lets it happen. (2) Discrepancy: in other cases, we are aware of the character's perspective, but we ourselves have a contrary or strongly divergent perspective. At the beginning of *Jaws* we know that the swimmer has no idea of the impending shark attack. Many film villains view their actions positively, while we condemn them. In slapstick comedies we laugh at the unlucky devils who get hit or get worked up about things. (3) Congruence: in these cases, our perspective is close enough to that of the characters so that both are similar without being identical. Often, we come close to the character's line of sight, without sharing it exactly. In *Casablanca's* farewell scene we have information similar to Ilsa's, we are supposed to assess the situation like Rick, and have feelings about their separation that are least partly similar to theirs. (4) Convergence: here we share the feelings of the characters spontaneously and to a greater extent. We can be frightened by a loud bang or the sudden appearance of a monster at the same time as the characters. (5) Active adoption: finally, in some cases we are asked to consciously put ourselves in the characters' place, to adopt their perspective, and to understand their inner life, for example when we observe the protagonist of a psychological drama for a long time after she has suffered a stroke of fate.

It often makes a difference for the involvement with characters whether viewers just recognise the perspective of the characters, gradually approach it, share it passively, or actively adopt it. Comparisons of perspectives can remain general or go into great detail, for example by investigating visual perspectives as to how viewing angle, focalisation, colour perception, movement, sharpness, and other features correspond. There are fundamental limits to a complete convergence

between the viewer's perspective and the character's perspective, at least in some respects. Even in the case of a subjective camera, our visual experience can hardly ever fully coincide with that of the characters, because the camera's optics differ from those of the human eye. The two-dimensional film images do not allow motion parallax and are usually sharp to the edge, so that we can focus our attention on different objects in the image. Nevertheless, subjective shots are intended to make us understand the view of characters and the stimuli they provide coincide to a large degree with the stimuli in the environment, as the characters would presumably perceive them. The same applies to subjective sound; one can therefore assume that it is generally possible to take on the visual and acoustic perspective to a great extent. The fact that films bring us close to characters in this way distinguishes them from literature and theatre—to some extent, they literally make it possible to see the world with different eyes, to hear it with different ears. In terms of knowledge, evaluation, volition, and emotion, films also make it possible, at least at times, to put oneself in the position of the characters (see Chapter 13). These possibilities of adopting perspectives play an essential role in understanding the difficult matters of 'identification' and 'empathy'.

13.4 Identification and Empathy

In everyday language, the term 'identification' is usually used vaguely to describe forms of involvement with characters, closeness to them, or 'putting oneself in their place'. 'Identification figures' are given great importance, and if they do not fulfil their function, that is reason for criticism. Script guides suggest strategies for this, but they often remain somewhat vague: 'The more human the need [of the character] is, the more it invites the viewer to identify' (Schütte 1999: 29). And they make unproved assumptions about causes: 'Identification is based on the desire to partake in other people's lives. This desire that is particularly strong in people whose own lives are dull and empty, while people whose lives are full and rich will be much less desirous of identifying themselves with others' (Vale 1998: 157). In most of such assumptions, it is not clear what exactly identification is and how it arises.

More explicitly defined, but hardly less problematic is the term within psychoanalysis. Here, 'identification' means a conscious or unconscious adoption of qualities and behaviours of other persons into one's own self through internalisation, or a psychological 'process through which one subject assimilates an aspect, a characteristic, an attribute of the other and transforms himself completely or partially according to the model of the other' (Laplanche and Pontalis 1999: 219). In this sense, Freud claims, for example, '[The Boy] then shows two psychologically different bonds, a simple sexual object-cathexis with the mother, an exemplary identification with the father' (1923: 58). This concept of identification as a long-term, identity-

constituting imitation and appropriation of the characteristics of others, however, differs considerably from the concept in everyday life and is not meant in regard to the reception of characters.

From the wide range of concepts of identification,³³ I would like to focus here on that of the philosopher Berys Gaut (1999). While many other theorists reject the notion entirely,³⁴ Gaut wants to retain it. This has the advantage of staying close to everyday language. Moreover, the related concept of empathy, which sometimes replaces the concept of identification, also needs clarification, and Gaut's conception assigns specific meanings to both terms. As a first step, he dismisses some possible meanings of 'identification'. The word literally means that two things are one. In film viewing, however, this can only be meant metaphorically, for no film viewer actually becomes identical with a character. It is also implausible for viewers to assume, on the basis of an illusion or self-deception, that they themselves are actually the character with whom they identify: Why else would they stay in their seats when the character is being pursued or tortured? Moreover, viewers also do not assume that identification is reciprocal: a child who identifies with Dracula may imagine being a vampire, but hardly that Dracula still goes to school like they do.

Gaut's own concept of 'imaginative identification', on the other hand, comes close to the everyday understanding in sayings like 'I wouldn't want to be in his shoes' or 'Put yourself in her place'. According to him, 'the act of imaginative identification involves imagining—not, strictly speaking, being that other person, but rather imagining being in her situation, where the idea of her situation encompasses every property she possesses, including all her physical and psychological traits' (Gaut 1999: 203). If one adapts this position to my previous findings and moderates it accordingly, it can be rephrased as follows: viewers identify with a character when they imagine themselves to be in the situation of the represented being in at least one crucial respect, or to have at least some of its defining traits.

So, in contrast to Gaut's strong assumption, I propose that viewers generally do not identify completely with a character, but only in certain crucial aspects. Their identification is relative and usually only partial, because we would not find complete identification in Gaut's sense anywhere. In the following, I start from this modified concept of identification, expand Gaut's approach with my own thoughts and link it to further philosophical and empirical research results. In this way, building on the previous results on the structure of represented beings (Chapter 6), the following three aspects of identification can be distinguished:

33 See Aumont, Bergala, and Marie 1992: 200–236; Cowie 1997: 72–122; Friedberg 1990; van Beneden 2001 for psychoanalytically oriented film theory; Jauß 1984 for a hermeneutic concept; Schneider 2000: 103ff. for an overview of cognitive approaches to literature.

34 Cf. Carroll 1998a; Smith 1995; Neill 1996; Plantinga 1999; Tan 1994.

- physical identification, such as the imagination of being able to fly, having the physical strength of the Hulk, being beautiful like Esmeralda or ugly like Quasimodo;
- social identification, such as the imagination of being an outcast or part of a community, having unlimited power or being desired like a femme fatale or James Bond;
- psychological identification, such as the idea of having special knowledge or undergoing traumatic experiences; and
- behavioural identification, such as imagining doing something taboo, brave, or sensational in a painstaking or elegant way.

Other concepts of identification can be positioned within this field. If, like Elizabeth Cowie (1997), one understands identification as taking on the character's position in a structure of desire, this is only one of many possibilities of physical, social, psychological, and behavioural identification. In addition, a close connection between identification and perspective becomes clear, as psychological identification consists in an imaginative adoption of the character's perspective with regard to relevant perceptions, thoughts, evaluations, motives, and feelings. Films can create a match (or at least similarity) between the viewer's perspective and the character's perspective in different ways: a match of the visual perspective can be achieved by the subjective camera, an acoustic one by subjective sound. A congruence of epistemic perspectives arises when viewers have the same information as the character. Evaluative, motivational, and affective perspectives, on the other hand, can only be influenced indirectly; the strategies for this will be discussed later.

The various aspects of psychological identification—like those of perspective—are in principle independent of each other. Whenever there is talk of viewers identifying with a character, it is therefore appropriate to ask: 'In what respect?' Gaut, for example, rejects the assumption that one also takes over the values and wishes of the character along with the visual perspective of a subjective camera (*ibid.*: 204). When you share the monster's view in a horror film, it doesn't necessarily mean that you feel the desire to kill. On the contrary: the subjective camera often disguises the identity of the monster and suggests taking over the feelings of the victim whose horrified face you can see.

Such a transfer of affects from the character to the spectator characterises empathy as a special case of identification: empathy is an imaginative approximation to the affective perspective of the others, a feeling with them.³⁵ Sympathy, on the

³⁵ Gaut makes a further differentiation here: while in emotional identification one only imagines feeling what the character feels, in 'empathetic identification' one really feels the same or at least something similar to the character, precisely *because* one imagines that the character has that feeling (*ibid.*: 206f.)

other hand, consists of an emotional taking sides with or feeling for the other. Sympathy can be supported by identification and empathy, but does not depend on them, and is expressed in a variety of experiences such as fear for a character or joy about their successes. Unlike empathy, these processes do not depend on imaginative identification with the character's feelings. While we fear for the young woman at the beginning of *Jaws*, she does not even suspect that she is in danger. It is precisely the knowledge that her perspective is very different from ours that influences our sympathy and increases the tension. I will discuss the relationships between identification, empathy and sympathy in more detail in Chapter 14.

In order to speak of psychological identification and empathy in the narrower sense, it is not enough that the audience and the character happen to share the same perspective. Rather, what is required is an active perspective-taking by the viewers, in which they also realise that the character has the same perspective as they do (or at least a similar one). Such perspective-taking can be described more precisely with the help of the psychological concept of simulation. According to this, one can try to understand other people—or characters—by mentally simulating their inner processes, i.e., by calling up similar processes of thinking, feeling etc. in oneself.³⁶ There are several further explanations for this. Chapter 5 showed that different kinds of imaginative processes are used to understand characters: sometimes we access their inner life as detached observers, sometimes we do it through simulation; and these are only the poles of a spectrum.³⁷ When we observe characters in a certain situation, we automatically register the general possibilities of action in that situation: one should flee from a shark, but escaping in water is difficult. In a way, we share a space of perception and action with the characters. In this space, we tend to focus our attention on things of which the characters also are aware; our gaze often follows their line of sight. In this process, the perception of situations and expressions of emotion can activate both innate affect programmes and emotional memory as well as learned patterns of social identity and classification. Mirror neurons in the brain respond to observing the actions of others with imaginative sharing or vicarious following. In addition, we sometimes project our own reactions onto the characters or simply assume that they react to a situation in a similar way to ourselves. The forms of perspective-taking that emerge on the basis of such processes are usually bodily-perceptual and proprioceptive; they include not only abstract imaginings but also the viewer's bodily sensation in and with an observed situation (Grodal 2001: 119).

The concept of identification sketched out by Gaut, however, goes beyond psychological identification as a momentary, situational adoption of mental

36 On Simulation Theory and its relationship to Theory Theory of understanding others, cf. Gordon and Cruz 2001; Gordon 1995.

37 Cf. Smith 1995, 1997, 1999; Gordon 1995; Gordon and Cruz 2001; Grodal 2001.

experiences and perspectives and also includes ideas about taking on lasting physical, mental, and social characteristics of the character. Philosophical and empirical studies provide further indications of how this could be understood. It seems plausible to assume that the viewers' self-model—the image that people have of themselves (Metzinger 1999)—resonates and overlaps with the character model during identification. The impression of 'being oneself' is determined by the interplay of various factors, including physical self-perception (proprioception), the perspective of perceiving the environment, self-positioning in space, autobiographical memory, the feeling of agency and being the author of one's own actions, and explicit thinking about oneself (cf. Blanke et al. 2005: 550). According to the concept of perspective proposed here, this could be supplemented by including self-referential evaluations, wishes, and feelings as components of the self-model. One could speak of a—partial—identification with film characters when central aspects of the current self-model change temporarily through the influence of film, for example by adopting others' perspectives of perception, self-positioning, wishes, or impulses for action. Neuroscientific research shows that this is not unusual; forms of partial detachment from the unified self are possible not only in pathological cases, but also in healthy individuals. Thus, test persons can develop the vivid impression that a rubber hand is their own hand or that they are looking at their body and the world from outside. In dreams it is also not unusual to see yourself from the outside while doing something and to know at the same time: that's me. The self-model of viewers could oscillate in a similar way between self-perception and character-perception.

In certain respects, however, the experiences of viewers and characters necessarily remain separate: viewers of audiovisual media can only share seeing and hearing with the characters, but not their sense of smell, taste, touch, and proprioception. While the characters can be assumed to touch and smell each other, fight, sweat, eat, drink, feel pain or physical stimulation, we sit relaxed in a cinema or in front of the television, mainly feeling the pleasant calm of our bodies, and react only subliminally to some weak olfactory and tactile associations that might accompany the optical and acoustic stimuli of the film. It is precisely this unusual combination of physical calmness on the one hand and the stimulation and assumption of perspectives of seeing, hearing, thinking, judging, wishing, feeling on the other hand that probably constitutes part of the fascination of our experience of films and their characters.

The proposed approach clarifies and systematically links the concepts of perspective, identification, and empathy. In this way it can integrate different, competing theoretical approaches and make both proximity and distance to characters understandable. Another task is now to describe more concretely the audiovisual and narrative strategies for guiding involvement with characters' perspectives. So how do films direct the viewers' perspective?

13.5 Cinematic Methods of Shaping Perspectives

Like our involvement in characters, our interactions and relationships with people in reality involve perspectives in two respects: we have perspectives *on* them and are in relationships of perspective *with* them. In contrast to the perception of real people, however, our perceptions of and affective reactions to characters are given a perspective by the film. Films effectively shape or influence our perspective on and with characters and thus direct our involvement.

The ways in which films direct the viewers' perspective on characters have already been described in Chapters 7 and 8. Through their style and means of presentation, films lend characters and their experiences a specific sensual quality. The strategic allocation of information in a film determines what we learn about the characters and when; it regulates our spatio-temporal accompaniment of the characters in their experiences and, more or less, grants access to their inner life (Smith's components of alignment). So far, however, I have hardly said anything about how films can create certain relationships between viewer and character perspectives—and thus also relationships of psychological identification and empathy. It is of crucial importance here that the various aspects of the viewer's perspective can be guided by different means and, in principle, independently of one another:

- Perception and imagination: through image and sound design, films can display perceptions and vivid ideas of characters relatively directly and evoke them in viewers. Rick's memory is visible to us in an audiovisual flashback.
- Thinking and knowledge: through narrative information, contextualisation, editing, and dialogue, films can convey in a relatively simple way what characters know and think about their world, and can evoke similar or different thoughts in viewers. By seeing Rick's memories, we learn something about his past and can see that he does not know why Ilsa left him.
- Judgement, desires, and feelings: it is more difficult for films to depict processes of characters' judgements, wishes, and feelings clearly; and even more so to trigger such processes in viewers as intended. This is usually achieved indirectly by emphasising moral characteristics or through affective cues; through atmospheric music and image composition; through suggestive editing, credible voice-over comments, ironic contrasts, and various other means (see Chapter 14). Whether Rick feels nostalgia, disappointment, anger, or despair when remembering Paris, whether he desires revenge on Ilsa, or how much he still loves her can only be guessed. And the flashback tends to encourage the audience to sympathise with Rick, but they could also find his sentimentality pathetic or ridiculous.

Typically, the connection between these areas is as follows: the images and sounds of the film directly convey visual and acoustic perspectives on the characters and their situation. In combination with further information (e.g., from a voice-over) and folk psychology, the viewers gain further insights into the inner life of the characters. This already results in perceptual and knowledge relationships to them. The fact that a character becomes the primary object of perception for the audience through spatio-temporal accompaniment generally brings the viewers close to their perspective of perception and knowledge. In following their external experiences, the viewers are usually preoccupied with the same objects and events as the characters, perceive the same space of action and can surmise how the characters relate to it. The thoughts, opinions, and values of the characters are often also conveyed through their dialogue, their imagination and phenomenal experience through subjective images and sounds. On this basis, viewers develop appraisals, wishes and feelings about the characters, their situation and the world depicted and are thus placed in relation to the value, wish and affect perspective of the characters. While the characters' visual, aural, and knowledge-related perspectives are often relatively clear, their evaluative, volitional and affective perspectives are less easy to grasp. Probably also for this reason, narratological theories of perspective have largely limited themselves to the study of perceptual and knowledge relations and have so far neglected the important aspect of evaluations, wishes and emotions. This aspect will be examined in more detail in Chapter 14. In the following, I will first concentrate on its basis, the relations of perception and knowledge between characters and spectators.

Visual and Auditive Perspective

One particular strength that sets films apart from other media is that they can bring the viewer's perception very close to that of the characters. In theatre we have a sensual and concrete, but fixed external perspective on the characters. When reading literature, we can freely switch between different perspectives, but grasp them only in terms of linguistic propositions. Film, however, has the possibility of conveying the perceptions of the characters directly and vividly through subjective camera angles or subjective sound. For example, the sound in *Raging Bull* suddenly becomes soft and dull after the protagonist has been hit on the ear in a boxing match.³⁸ On the other hand, compared to in literature it is more difficult to reproduce the linguistic-propositional thinking of characters in films. This can be achieved by using voice-over or text inserts, but these conspicuous devices are usually avoided. More often, the characters' thoughts, desires, and feelings are suggested by their appearance, their dialogues, and their behaviour,

38 On further strategies of creating subjective acoustic perspectives see Flückiger 2001: Chapter 12.

by the narrative context, by image composition, music, sound, and editing, and the audience has to infer them from those cues.

For these reasons, the control of perceptual perspectives is particularly important in film. This applies on the one hand to controlling acoustic perspective through sound design (see Flückiger 2001), and on the other hand to controlling optical perspective through camera work, mise-en-scene, and editing. Without wishing to diminish the importance of the acoustic perspective, I will concentrate on relationships of optical perspectives because of their complexity. Various forms of point-of-view (POV) shots have developed. The minimum basic form is the combination of two or three shots: one shows the view of one character (point/glance shot), the other what the character sees (point/object shot), and often a third type shows their reaction to what they have seen (Branigan 1984). These shots can be combined in different forms, orders, and frequencies.³⁹ The gazes of other figures can also be included: Ilsa exchanges glances with her former lover Rick Blaine and her husband Victor Laszlo. In dialogues, the shot-counter-shot method is often used: we see each of the participants alternately from the point of view of the other. The point/object shot can be approximated to the subjective perception of a character to varying degrees. It can be taken directly from the character's point of view (subjective camera) or only from approximately the same direction (eyeline match, over-the-shoulder shot).

The specific way the character sees and experiences their object of vision can also be communicated through markers of subjectivity, for example through the use of different shot sizes, depth of field, a restless hand camera, or mise-en-scene (visual metaphors, graphic image composition, lighting, colour). Ingrid Bergman's close-ups, in which the beauty of her face is idealised by soft focus, glamour lighting, hair and eye lights, while the musical leitmotif 'As Time Goes By' triggers a nostalgic-romantic mood, make it obvious to the audience that Rick is paying attention to Ilsa and how he perceives her. Glances often show not only what characters are focusing their attention on and what knowledge they acquire, but what they are thinking, wanting, and feeling, as well.

The scene from *Casablanca*, in which Rick appears in the picture for the first time after having been spoken about repeatedly before (timestamp 8:30; see Chapter 5), shows how elaborate and ingenious visual perspectives are used in Hollywood cinema to put viewers in relationship to characters (Figures 47–49). The scene is about one minute long, but contains a multitude of changes of perspective in this short time. In the following list, the shots are numbered, and other changes are marked by letters:

4. Medium long shot: in Rick's Café, the camera follows an employee handing a piece of paper to someone left in the off—probably Rick. Only his hand

39 Branigan (1984) and Grimm (1996: Chapter 3) define no fewer than ten possible camera set-ups and eight editing patterns in POV shots.

appears in the picture.

5. Close-up: the hand signs a check with 'OK. Rick'; this can be seen from above, approximately from the point of view of the writer (Figure 47).
6. A frontal medium close shot shows the hand, the cheque, a wine glass, a chess board, and an ashtray with a burning cigarette.
 - a. 3a. The hand carries the cigarette up, the camera pans with it. Only now, through the re-framing, do we see Rick's face—for the first time in the film.
 - b. 3b. The camera moves back a little. From here, a series of POV shots begins: Rick looks up from the chessboard to the right of the picture (Figure 48).
7. Long shot: overlooking most of the room, on the right at the back of the room, a bouncer returns Rick's gaze. Rick is at the left front of the picture, shown obliquely from behind and out of focus. We are close to his view of the door (Figure 49).
8. Knee shot: guests enter the room; a newcomer at the door looks in Rick's direction.
9. (Like 3b.) Rick looks up and shakes his head slightly.
10. Medium close shot: the bouncer begins to close the door in front of the guest.
11. Medium shot: in the adjacent room not visible to Rick, the angry guest shoves the bouncer aside and pushes the door open again.
12. (Like 7.) Again seen from inside, the bouncer and the guest look in Rick's direction. He walks through the picture from the left and then remains in the frame on the right, so that we look diagonally over his shoulder from behind at the guest in a three shot. Another newcomer, Ugarte, pushes his way through the three into the room, which Rick allows.
13. Rick coolly rejects the angry guest, an arrogant German banker, in an over-the-shoulder shot from behind the banker.
14. (Like 7., 9.) The irate guest leaves. This concludes the series of POV shots and the introduction.
15. In a medium long shot of the interior, Rick walks through the room from the door at the back right of the picture. The camera follows him in a combination of pan and travelling shots; when he is stopped by Ugarte, it stops with him. A new scene begins, in which Rick will get the transit visas from Ugarte.





Fig. 47–49 Changing visual perspectives during Rick Blaine's first appearance in *Casablanca*. Fig. 47 Rick's signature (POV shot/subjective). Fig. 48 Rick's scrutinising look towards the door (point/glance shot). Fig. 49 The bouncer and the newcomers return Rick's look (point/object shot and eyeline match). (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.)

The example shows how flexible and variable our visual perspective on and with characters generally is. We are constantly approaching and moving away from various figures; the picture changes about every six seconds on the average. The acoustic perspective changes much less frequently. Unobtrusive ambient sound can be heard in the background, Sam's piano is heard from the next room when the door is open. The dialogues of the characters shown in the picture are in the foreground and are always near, clearly audible, and understandable. The acoustic perspectives of the viewers are thus largely oriented towards the visual ones, without changing so strongly and frequently.

This form of providing information directs our knowledge about the characters and achieves a variety of effects in terms of our engagement with them. The most important object of our attention is Rick, but he too is by no means always to be seen or heard. On the contrary: before the scene begins, we only get information about Rick when others talk about him. The curiosity provoked by this is intensified by the visual perspective: the moment in which we get to see Rick's face is delayed, the camera initially only shows his writing hand. In this phase of exposition our overall knowledge is less than that of all the relevant characters. We know hardly anything about Rick, know neither his employees nor Ugarte. Our need for orientation forms the basis for curiosity and

suspense about the characters, and this is intensified, delayed, and finally satisfied by the use of perspective. But we do not always know less than the characters; for example, unlike Rick, we see what is happening outside the door.

Both our perspective on Rick and the relationship of our perspective to his are constantly changing. We see Rick from near and far, from the front, from behind, and from the side. These changes of perspective help us to develop a complete body image of him quickly, to grasp the most important features of his facial expressions and gestures, and to understand his actions. Our relationship to Rick's visual perspective is just as flexible. In the majority of shots there is no correspondence between Rick's view and ours; often we see something else or more than he can see from his position. During the series of POV shots we approach not only his view through eyeline matches, but also the view of other characters, even that of the unpleasant guest. Generally speaking, it can be said that we are close to Rick's view more often than that of other characters. At least as important, however, is the change of perspective, which always ensures attention to details of the scene and provides the information needed.

The relationship between Rick's perspective and the intended viewer's perspective must be viewed in a differentiated way in regard to values, desires, and feelings, as well as perception and knowledge. Here, too, rather than complete agreement or discrepancy, there is a range of more or less strong similarities and differences. A similarity in the value perspective is that both Rick and we (as intended or ideal viewers) disapprove of the blustering banker; at the same time, one difference is that we can rate Rick's actions as cool while he himself does not (a prerequisite for coolness). The arrogance of the unpleasant guest makes us want Rick to rebuff him; this coincides with his own intention. The fulfilment of the wish—Rick coolly denies the German banker entrance—is intended to make us respect Rick, while he himself does not cherish such feelings for himself. In addition, we may wish or imagine acting in a similar way if we were in a similar position of power. Thus, while the viewers' perspectives of judgement, desire, and feeling may approach Rick's experiences—at least more than the banker's—they also differ from his perspective in some respects.

More general consequences can be drawn from this scene for the analysis of involvement with characters. The audience's perceptions, knowledge, evaluation, desires, and feelings apparently each develop with a certain momentum of their own. Therefore it is worth investigating each of these areas separately. In addition, the relationship between the viewer's perspective and the character's perspective can constantly change in each of these areas; the viewer's experience can temporarily approach that of the character in one point and at the same time distance itself from it in another. Instead of starting from a monolithic spectator perspective, which is thought to be in a uniform, constant relationship to the character's perspective, it makes more sense to examine the dynamic development of the perspective relationships in their various aspects during the analysis. This is the only way to discover many effects of how the film steers perspective.

Rick's introductory scene is a relatively simple example in one important respect. We infer what is going on in Rick, his subjective experience, mainly from outside. We are brought closer to his perception only by two classical means of subjectivisation. First, the subjective camera gives us Rick's visual perspective on the cheque, even before we can recognise Rick himself and recognise that perspective as his. As the scene progresses, we occasionally approach his point of view through eyeline matches. Films, however, can employ even further-reaching techniques of stronger subjectification.

Forms of Visual Subjectivity in Film

In principle, all cinematic devices and techniques can be used to reveal the inner life of characters (see Chapter 7 and Chapter 8). It is most often conveyed through dialogues or derived from external behaviour and the situational context. Before saying goodbye, Rick and Ilsa talk at length about their feelings. And it takes little imagination to recognise the fear of death of shark attack victims. In rarer cases the subjectivity of characters is represented through explicitly symbolic images and sounds. In animated cartoons, a character's greed can be symbolised by dollar signs in their eyes; in melodrama, feelings of imprisonment can be expressed by filming the characters through the bars of stair railings or windows. In addition, characters' thoughts can be expressed in voice-over, which can be related to the pictures in various ways. All such formal aspects can be combined in various ways, which provides films with a rich set of instruments and forms to convey the inner life of figures. However, these formal means often only impart a certain knowledge of the characters' inner lives to the viewers without necessarily reflecting their experiential qualities.

A stronger tendency to make the viewers partly share a character's subjective experience can be achieved by several other methods. These include, for example, non-diegetic mood music, which often—like the melancholic 'As Time Goes By' motif—not only suggests the feelings of the characters, but at the same time evokes similar moods in the audience, i.e., brings about an approximation of the emotional perspective. Similar things can be achieved through audiovisual metaphors such as the *mise-en-scène* of 'atmospheric spaces' or the accentuation of pleasant or unpleasant noises, whereby the effects of image and sound reinforce each other (Fahlenbrach 2003).

Experiential qualities of character perception and imagination can be effectively transferred through various mimetic methods of visual subjectivation.⁴⁰ While eyeline matches only approximate the direction of a character's gaze and simple POV shots—like Rick's look at the cheque—merely reflect the content of visual perspectives, subjectivised POV shots (so-called perception shots) convey additional aspects such as changes in perception, shifts in attention, intense sensations or the subjective experience of time of characters who are in a state of drug intoxication, emotional

40 Cf. Branigan 1984; Wilson 2006; Grimm 1996, 59–60; Borstnar, Pabst, and Wulff 2002: 172–173.

excitement, illness or daze. These experiences can be made tangible through various cinematic means, such as surreal image content, unreal mise-en-scene, very bright or dark lighting, luminous or desaturated colours, changes to black and white, distortion of proportions through wide-angle lenses, blur, shifts in depth of field, filters, zooms, handheld camera, slow motion or fast motion, freeze frames, dissolves, irritatingly fast cuts or jump cuts. The fact that a character suddenly becomes aware of a detail—a weapon or a revealing hand movement—can be shown, for example, by abruptly focusing on it or highlighting it in a surprising close-up. In *Vertigo* and *Jaws*, dolly-zooms are used to change the proportions in the image and thus to transmit the dizziness of the protagonists to the audience ('*Vertigo* effect').

While perception shots are bound to what the character perceives in the outside world, *completely imaginative shots* (also called mental state shots, mind's eye, or 'mindscreen'; cf. Kawin 1978) convey purely subjective inner processes and imaginations such as dreams, hallucinations, fantasies, pictorial thinking, drug trips, memories, or plans for the future. *Partially imaginative shots* show experiences in which some imaginary elements blend into the perception of the outside world. For example, the main characters of the TV series *Six Feet Under* regularly see dead people communicating with them in their everyday environment. That the protagonists of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* perceive their environment in an extremely distorted way while on drugs is made clear by surreal visuals, for example when casino employees suddenly turn into huge lizards. In Oskar Roehler's *Agnes und seine Brüder/Agnes and His Brothers*, the distorted perception of the reality of a sex-addicted librarian is conveyed in that the camera is constantly caught on a multitude of provocatively dressed and staged women.

Interesting, also for theories of consciousness, is the fact that subjective experiences of film characters are often not presented from their visual perspective, but from a subjectivised external perspective, which nevertheless exhibits some features of the character's experience. In *Casablanca*'s flashback we see Rick and Ilsa from the outside, and it remains unclear to what extent what we see corresponds to the felt experiences he remembers. In *Murder, My Sweet* we watch the drugged detective Marlowe stagger through the room. Although it is an external view, the image appears to be filtered through smoke and spiderwebs, reproducing his distorted perception.

In the various forms of visual subjectivisation, the relationship between the viewer's perception and the characters' experience can therefore be quite complex. It often remains indeterminate or ambiguous. As a rule, subjectified shots are marked by context or conventional means of representation (e.g., crossfades) so that viewers can clearly recognise them and assign them to a character. In some cases, however, the subjective quality of what is depicted can only be recognised afterwards—with surprising or irritating effects. In several episodes of *Six Feet Under*, the main characters suddenly behave in socially inappropriate ways and break taboos through emotional outbursts, screams, insults, or revealing erotic propositions. These violations of

social norms are initially presented 'realistically' in image and sound and are only subsequently exposed as mere fantasies or impulses that were suppressed in reality. In mind game films like *Jacob's Ladder*, *Vanilla Sky*, or *The Sixth Sense*, the unmarked, unreliable representation of subjectivity determines the entire plot. Only at the end, in a surprising twist, does it become clear that the story did not really happen as it was shown, but was only a product of the protagonist's imagination. In *Fight Club*, for example, we see the nameless protagonist—in the screenplay 'Jack' (Edward Norton)—getting to know the charismatic Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) and founding a movement with him in which men seek to overcome their feelings of meaninglessness in life and their capitalist socialisation through brutal fist fights. In retrospect, however, it turns out that Tyler Durden only exists in 'Jack's' imagination—without knowing it, we have followed a deceptive external representation of his inner life the whole time, the unreliable first-person narrator's mindscreen. This points to another important aspect of the viewers' involvement with characters: the relations between the viewers' perspective and the character's perspective are sometimes influenced by intermediary narrative instances that themselves have a perspective.

13.6 Polyphony of Perspectivation: Characters, Narrators, and Filmmakers

Many theories of character involvement, especially those from media psychology, tend to neglect the role of narrative mediation and seem to assume that film audiences have some kind of unmediated access to characters. However, in at least some films, diegetic or non-diegetic narrators significantly influence the audience's relationships with the characters by stepping between them, so to speak. Unlike the (other) characters, most narrators usually do not perceive what is happening in the story, but imagine it, mediate it, represent it or express it from a particular perspective (cf. Chatman 1986: 194). In this way, they can influence the viewers' perspective on and with the characters, represent or imitate the characters' perspectives and express their own perspectives on them. Furthermore, characters can be part of different layers of embedded narratives, and they can become narrators themselves. Sometimes, in-film narrators provide us with everything we know about the characters. Without being able to go into the complex subject of cinematic narration in more detail, I would therefore like to make at least a few general remarks.⁴¹ In some films there are clearly recognisable narrative instances of various kinds:

- First-person narrator: in *Suzhou River*, the protagonist tells his own story by means of voice-over and camera recording. In *Sunset Boulevard*, the first-person narrator speaks retrospectively from the hereafter. In *Fight Club*, he

41 For more detailed examinations of film narration see Branigan 1992; Grimm 1996.

is epistemically unreliable: it remains unclear until the end that he portrays the disturbed perspective of his narrated self.

- Third-person narrator: in *Barry Lyndon*, a nameless voice-over narrator reports the rise and fall of the eponymous hero. His story is morally unreliable, his cold-hearted assessment is not to be trusted. In contrast, the intertitles of silent films usually refer to reliable narrative instances whose evaluation of the characters is to be adopted by the viewers.
- We-narrator: in *The Virgin Suicides*, a voice-over narrator remembers how all five daughters of a neighbouring family killed themselves. The narrator belongs to a group of schoolboys who admired and observed the girls. He always speaks in the first-person plural for this group, and it never becomes clear which of the boys he is.
- Multiple narrators: in *Citizen Kane*, Kane's life is first summarised by the impersonal narrative instance of a newsreel. Later, a reporter interviews acquaintances of the deceased. These are seen briefly, then their voice-over makes a transition to flashbacks showing the content of their stories.
- Multiple narrators on several levels: in *Rashomon*, a monk and a lumberjack relate a court case (frame story). In this trial, a bandit, a woman, and her dead husband give their contradictory versions of a crime, but it remains impossible to decide which version is true (embedded narrative). Finally, in the frame story, the woodcutter, who witnessed the events, tells his—also questionable—version of what happened.

Some of these narrative instances are at the same time characters, recognisable represented beings with consciousness. Others, such as the voice-over narrator at the beginning of *Casablanca*, remain too rudimentary to be considered characters. A preliminary distinction can thus be made between personal and impersonal narrative instances; between diegetic narrators who are part of the story and non-diegetic narrators who stand outside the story; between first-, second-, and third-person narrators; between singular or plural narrators; between narrators who are continuously present (for example through their voice) and those who merely initiate an audiovisual representation of the story; between frame narrators and internal narrators; and between reliable and unreliable narrators. All these types of narrative instances take on a certain perspective on the characters, which can influence the viewer's perspective, but can also differ from it and clash with it. In addition, characters within the narrative can have a different reality status: some characters are merely invented by the narrators or their reflector characters (Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*), the qualities of others depend on the narrator's report and its authority and credibility (*Rashomon*).

In short, sometimes films have narrators, sometimes these narrators are characters

themselves, and sometimes reality status, characteristics, and perspective of other characters depend on them. But do all films have an overriding narrative authority? This question is highly controversial within film studies.⁴²

Various cinematic elements seem to indicate that there are creative narrative instances. Examples include prologues, epilogues, unrealistic 'mouthpiece dialogues', non-diegetic music, acting styles that create a distance to the role, anachronisms, meaningful names, unusual camera perspectives (high or low angle, tilt), irises and frames, text inserts, blurred or distorted images, or dissolves from narrators to the story they are telling.⁴³ Such techniques make it obvious that a film is a communicative artefact and can characterise, comment on, evaluate, or ironise characters from a higher perspective. Semiotic approaches in media studies therefore usually assume that there must always be a narrative instance that selects the images and sounds of a film and combines them to create certain effects—an 'enunciator', a 'cinematic narrator', or a 'grand image-maker', whose work can also be perceived by the audience (cf. Gaudreault and Jost 1999).

In contrast, many cognitive media theorists assume that the blanket assumption of narrative instances in audiovisual media is superfluous and misleading. According to them, film narrators or 'implicit authors' only exist if competent viewers actually construct them in the reception process based on specific cues in the film (cf. Bordwell 1985a). Even if one assumes that viewers basically perceive films as consciously designed means of communication (Wulff 1999a), it is not strictly necessary to attribute their design to narrators or implicit authors.⁴⁴ Rather, it could also be attributed to the real filmmakers, usually teams of cooperating specialists. Moreover, since the moving images and sounds of films correspond in many ways to the stimuli of non-media environments, and since most viewers concentrate on a film's storyworld, viewers often have the impression that they are directly experiencing this depicted world. In any case, the image-sound combinations seen on the screen do not refer to an author as obviously as language does to a speaker or writer. For all these reasons, according to cognitive media theory, viewers watching a film often do not construct or perceive implied filmmakers or film-internal narrative instances or do so only selectively and sporadically.

Although I tend towards the second, cognitive position, my ideas about perspective are compatible with both approaches, since both assume that a hierarchy of levels of narration is at least sometimes *possible* in film. In the most complex case, films can refer to narrative instances on four levels: the real filmmakers, extra-diegetic (or extra-fictional) narrators, non-diegetic, and diegetic narrators. All these can convey the characters' actions and present a perspective on what happens (cf. Branigan 1992). Films can establish any of these narrative levels more or less precisely. For example,

42 For an overview of the discussion see Stam, Burgoyne, and Flitterman-Lewis 1992: 69–122.

43 Cf. Gaudreault and Jost 1999; Pfister 1988: Chapter 3.6.

44 Kindt and Müller (2006) offer convincing arguments against the premise of an 'implicit author'.

the beginning of *Casablanca* refers to at least two narrative instances: the title sequence is initially reminiscent of the filmmakers, some of whom are mentioned in the credits. The prologue's voice-over belongs to a non-diegetic narrator. First, he sketches the political situation of Europe in an extra-fictional way, then switches to a fictional representation of life in Casablanca, and soon the voice-over gives way to a direct representation of events in picture and sound. Thus, there are various narrators even in classical, immersive Hollywood cinema, but they usually only come to the fore at the beginning and at the end of the film.

Filmmakers and narrators can make the perspective of characters recognisable for the audience. Moreover, they can represent the fictional world from the perspective of the characters and establish a similar viewer perspective on this world. Such mediations between perspectives are referred to in narrative theory as 'perspectivation', 'focalisation', 'subjectivation', or 'filtering'.⁴⁵ A good starting point to clarify these controversial terms is Uri Margolin's definition of focalisation as 'textual representation of specific (pre-)existing sensory elements of the text's story world as registered [...] by some mind or recording device which is a member of this world' (2006: 2). Put simply, this means that the film or its narrative instances not only depict that a character experiences something, but also *how* they experience it. They give the viewer access to the character's experiential perspective on the depicted world. The character providing the perspective is usually referred to as a 'focaliser' or 'filter'. Since the notion of focalisation is often limited to the perceptual and epistemic perspective, I will speak in a broader sense of the *perspectivisation* of the represented world by characters or other experiencing entities. By this I mean that the perspective of spectators is made to converge with the perspective of characters or other narrative entities, which can include any of the five aspects of perspective mentioned above. The convergence of spectators', characters', narrators', and filmmakers' perspectives can thus include their perception/imagination, their thinking, their evaluation, their wishes, and their feelings.

Perspectivisation through a character is achieved through various cinematic strategies—including the aforementioned techniques of subjectivation—and can take on more or less complex forms. Often several relationships among perspectives are involved. For instance, it can be the case that on the basis of the film, (1) the audience should imagine, (2) how a narrator tells, (3) how a perspectivising character experiences (perceives, imagines, thinks about, evaluates, wishes, reacts emotionally to) (4) another character doing something or experiencing something.⁴⁶ The relationship between the viewer and the perspective of the character can therefore be

45 The concept of focalisation was originated by Genette (1980), who limited its scope to psychological processes of knowledge and perception and to the objects of actions and character psychology. Smith (1995) replaces the concept of focalisation with 'alignment'.

46 Here, I am modifying a well-known schema of Mieke Bal: 'X relates that Y sees that Z does' (cf. Bal 2002; Griem and Voigts-Virchow 2002: 169).

conveyed through narrators, who in turn have their own perspective on the character and what they have experienced. In addition, the objects to which the narrator and perspective character refer may be other characters who in turn experience something from a certain perspective. Such complex entanglements of perspectives seem confusing, when put into words, but they are quite frequent in film. The common way of saying that characters are depicted from a certain perspective is therefore often a strong simplification. Such simplifications are unavoidable in analysis in order to highlight the essentials; however, their vagueness often leads to misunderstandings. My suggestions should help make it easier to question and clarify them if necessary.

The multi-layered and polyphonic way in which films can direct the perspectival involvement with characters can be illustrated by a sequence from Scorsese's classic *Taxi Driver*. The film tells the story of the taxi driver and Vietnam veteran Travis Bickle (Robert de Niro), whose inability to deal with other people, loneliness, and frustration finally drive him into a murderous rampage. We accompany Travis throughout the film and perceive many things — such as his nocturnal journeys through New York's red-light district—from his visual perspective and in subjective perception shots. In many ways we also share his level of information, and his thinking is conveyed through occasional voice-overs. However, we learn relatively little about his history, and the deeper reasons for his behaviour remain unclear, which can arouse our curiosity. More importantly, many of his values, desires, and feelings are sociopathic and are likely to be rejected by most viewers. The following short but central sequence of about fifty seconds (9:40–10:30) shows how artfully the film guides involvement with this difficult character.

1. Travis sits in a porn cinema after unsuccessfully asking its ticket seller for a date. He stares motionless at the screen. We see him from the front in a medium shot, the camera moves slowly from left to right and remains focused on him while the blurred heads of the other cinema-goers glide through the frame in front of him. The diegetic sounds fade out, only the sombre marching rhythm of a drum set and Travis' voice-over can be heard: 'Twelve hours of work and I still can't sleep. Damn. Days go on and on. And they don't end'.
2. Now Travis lies dressed on the bed in his shabby room, his hands crossed behind his head, lost in thought. The camera moves up in a slow crane movement and remains pointed at him, so that he can be seen from further and further up. Percussion and voice-over continue in the meantime: 'All my life needed was a sense of some place to go. I don't believe that one should devote his life to morbid self-attention. I believe someone should become a person like other people'.
3. Soft harp music begins, we are outside on the street. The hand camera pushes through passers-by, who appear distorted and accelerated by a

wide-angle lens. Three short shots of this type follow each other in fast jump cuts, some at eye-level, some low-angle. A saxophone begins with the melancholic leitmotif that has already accompanied Travis's journeys through New York. His voice-over says: 'I first saw her at Palantine headquarters at 63rd and Broadway. She was wearing a white dress'.

4. The camera, again moving slowly from right to left, is now focused on the entrance to a campaign office; a dark-haired, bearded man sits next to it. Passers-by glide through the middle wide shot in slow motion and blur. The voice of Travis says: 'She appeared like an angel out of this filthy mass'. A young, pretty woman in a white dress (Betsy) appears from the right between the passers-by and walks left towards the door of the campaign office (Figure 50). The sitting man looks around at her; another comes out the door and greets her, she replies cheerfully. Voice-over: 'She is alone. They...cannot...touch...her'.
5. With the last spoken word 'her', the street scene dissolves into the text of this word, written in pencil on cheap paper.
6. After another quick dissolve, Travis can be seen—from behind and above—writing a diary. The camera raises further up and approaches him at a steep angle.
7. With a cut to the campaign office, the street sounds of the outside world set in again.



Fig. 50 Travis Bickle's subjective view—or memory?—of Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) and her unknown admirer (left, Martin Scorsese in a cameo). (Dir. Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver*, 1976, Bill/Phillips Productions/Italo-Judeo Productions, USA. All rights reserved.)

In this barely one-minute-long sequence, several perspectives overlap, interact, and influence the audience's involvement. The sequence is framed by the depiction of Travis from the perspective of an outside observer. But then the causal connection between image and sound dissolves. The fading out of diegetic noise, the use of non-diegetic music (by Bernard Herrmann) and leaps in perspective, time, and space give the sequence an overall lyrical, associative, and subjective effect. On the sound level, Travis's voice-over reflects his thoughts while writing his diary (a process established previously). His initially gloomy thoughts are accompanied by the relentlessly sluggish, somewhat threatening marching rhythm of the drums; with the memory of Betsy, gentle harps and winds begin to play Travis's wistful leitmotif. The music here not only conveys Travis's feelings, but can also evoke similar moods in the audience. The relationship between the images and Travis's voice-over narrative remains unclear at first. The beginning and end of the sequence show him observed from outside, in between he becomes an observer: subjective POV shots bring us close to his visual perspective. The hand-held camera with a wide-angle lens and the fast jump cuts make the street scenes seem hectic, the distorted passers-by seem to move on collision courses. Betsy, on the other hand, is shown in slow motion, which stretches the duration of her appearance, makes her seem to be gliding and pleasantly calm, allows us to observe her appearance precisely, gives the moment special meaning. The dissolve to his written diary later makes it clear that it is not Travis's current perception, but his memory that was shown.

In many ways, the sequence brings the audience very close to Travis. We get a glimpse into his thoughts, experience his subjective memory, and can share his mood to a certain degree. Not only Travis views Betsy positively, most of the spectators will also find the smiling young woman likeable or attractive. That Travis wishes to have a goal in life, a stable identity, and a love relationship is also understandable.

However, other strategies put this perspectival 'closeness' to Travis into question. Firstly, there is the narrative context: just before Travis in his voice-over gushes about the woman in the white dress, who remains untouched by the dirty crowd of people, we see him sitting in the porn movie after having tried to chat up the annoyed cashier. Moreover, his previous value judgements in the diary voice-over were anything but rational. He hatefully described Blacks, drug addicts, and prostitutes as scum that should be washed off the streets. With this background, his current enthusiasm and his use of clichéd phrases (the pure woman) and stereotypical images (the object of love in slow motion) seem like an idealising projection that viewers should not trust. The visual perspective on Travis at the beginning and end of the sequence—the camera that conspicuously moves up to view him from above—reinforces the implicit suggestion not only to come closer to him, but also to make him the object of distanced analysis. This critically commenting external perspective on Travis and his inner life can be assigned to the filmmakers or a higher-level narrative instance. After all, *Taxi Driver* is a well-known auteur film made by the team Paul Schrader (script) and Martin

Scorsese (director). And not only that, the film also expressly refers to this level: the dark-haired, bearded man, who sits at the entrance of the election office and follows Betsy with his look, is none other than director Scorsese himself (Figure 50).

At least four levels of perspective are interlocked in this short sequence. At first, we seem to observe Travis in the porn cinema directly, from an unmediated external perspective. Then the voice-over and the music bring Travis's perspective to the fore, as he narrates his thoughts in the diary. In this way, in his memories he takes the visual perspective of his former experiencing self, observing Betsy. His observation and memory are implicitly commented on from the meta-perspective of the filmmakers through their conspicuous film form and visual presence. While in terms of perception, thinking and in some sense also feeling we are brought close to Travis as an observer or narrator, the filmmakers' commentary distances us from him in terms of awareness and evaluation of what is perceived (cf. also Figure 51). Such complex relationships with characters in terms of perspective are by no means rare and can have a significant influence on involvement. Not all viewers will always register all levels of perspective and react equally to them, but in many cases, they affect how we experience characters.



Fig. 51 After the climax of *Taxi Driver*, the conspicuous, distanced, analytical view of the camera on Travis from above is taken up again and shows us the consequences of his development in a long travelling shot: after Travis has unleashed a bloodbath while freeing the child prostitute Iris (Jody Foster), the camera moves back over the slaughter. (Dir. Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver*, 1976, Bill/Phillips Productions/Italo-Judeo Productions, USA. All rights reserved.)

More generally and more strongly related to the characters themselves, it can be stated that characters can take up different positions as objects of perspectives, active carriers of a perspective, perspective filters, or holders of a narrative perspective:⁴⁷

47 My ideas here draw on the work of Seymour Chatman, who suggests replacing 'point of view' with

- Objects of perspective: as active inhabitants of the depicted world, all characters are objects of the perspective of viewers and sometimes of narrators. They can take on special roles in that: as a centre of attention, a main character plays a central role in the audience's film experience and their consciousness is focused on the character. Some characters, mostly protagonists, also become a *centre of affective involvement*: the viewers take sides for them particularly strongly and judge the action in regard to the characters' objective interests, whether the characters are aware of these interests or not. Characters that look directly into the camera can temporarily become imaginary communication and interaction partners for the audience.
- Filters/focalisers: the represented world can be 'filtered' through the consciousness of characters, i.e., represented according to their perspectives of perception, knowledge, evaluation, desire, and feeling. It is important that perspectivisation can take place through multiple characters and in different ways. If the character functions as a *perception filter*, the audiovisual presentation is oriented towards their seeing, hearing, and imagining, for example through POV shots, subjective shots, or subjective sound. If the character functions as an *information filter*, the information that is provided remains limited to their knowledge to a large degree. If the character functions as a *value filter*, their attitudes are communicated in detail and suggested to the viewers.
- Narrator: characters can take on various narrative functions, e.g., as first-person narrators who report on their own experiences. They can also become the mouthpiece of filmmakers or narrators by clearly expressing their attitudes in dialogue (rather their own independent, psychologically based attitudes).

These different positions are dynamic, flexible, and do not exclude each other; a character—as in the example *Taxi Driver*—can serve as an agent, filter, and narrator sequentially or even simultaneously within a single sequence, so that the viewers can have diverse relationships with them.

13.7 Common Perspective Structures in Film

It has become clear that the perspective structures that influence involvement with film characters are often very complex and changeable. In order to analyse them and their effects, one can compare in detail the perspectives of all those involved—viewers, filmmakers, narrators, characters—and determine their various relationships.

four functions of characters and narrators (1986: 196ff.): filter, center, slant, and interest-focus. Cf. also Branigan 1992: 100–07.

However, since this method quickly leads to excessive complexity when investigating entire films with large constellations of characters, heuristic typologies of narrative situations and perspective structures have been developed, mostly within theatre and literary studies.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, most of them are unsuitable for the analysis of involvement with film characters, because they usually assume that there are always narrators within the text and that the perspectivisation with regard to perception, knowledge, evaluation, wishes, and feelings is always uniform. However, as the previous examples have shown, this is by no means the case.

For the analysis of involvement, it makes more sense to start from the general basic question of whose perspective on the characters and their environment viewers approach most closely in which respect. On that basis, four general types of perspective structures can be distinguished:

- Direct perspectivisation: the spectators seem to perceive the characters' environment from an objective external perspective and are not bound in their thinking, judging, desires, and feelings to the characters' experience. The film contains neither subjective forms of images and sounds (e.g., POV shots) nor judgemental comments or non-diegetic elements that refer to filmmakers or narrators (e.g., music, voice-over, conspicuous camera movements). Examples of this are forms of cinematic narrative that are considered particularly naturalistic or immersive.
- Perspectivisation through filmmakers: the audience perceives the characters and their environment as constructs of the filmmakers, whose creative interventions and judgemental comments are marked by conspicuous cinematic and self-referential forms and invite them to develop assessments, wishes and feelings. Examples are the *Taxi Driver* sequence discussed above or Alexander Kluge's *Die Artisten in der Zirkuskuppel: ratlos/Artists Under the Big Top: Perplexed*.
- Perspectivisation through narrative instances: the audience perceives the characters and their environment as imaginative constructs of internal narrative instances in the film, which can have more or less knowledge than the characters and suggest to the viewers certain views, evaluations, wishes, and feelings regarding what is depicted. That narrators are present does not necessarily imply that they also control the overall perspective. The narrated world can also be completely or partially focused on characters (e.g., in *Taxi*

48 Stanzel (1991) distinguishes between first-person narration, authorial narration from an omniscient overview, and personal narration from the restricted perspective of a reflector character. Genette (1980) distinguishes between narrators that are within or outside the diegesis, and between those that say more than the individual characters know (zero-focalisation), that limit their narration to the knowledge and experience of a character internal focalisation), or only depicts external events, not the inner life of the characters (external focalisation). The model has been adapted for film studies by Grimm (1996: Chapter 3).

Driver; or the experiential, not the narrative self of 'Jack' in *Fight Club*).

- Perspectivisation through characters: the viewers experience the depicted world in decisive ways similarly to focalising or filtering characters. This can be achieved through the use of perceptually subjectified images and sounds, the narrative regulation of knowledge, and the indirect influencing of judgements, wishes, and feelings through film style (e.g., mood music).

Since films usually have several characters and sometimes several narrative instances, in the last two types of perspective structure the question arises as to how many and which characters or narrators are used to give a perspective on the depicted world. There are several possibilities here:

- Fixed perspectivisation: a continuous focusing through a single character in every respect is rare. *Lady in the Lake* may be seen as an attempt to do so. Thrillers like *Rosemary's Baby* also come relatively close to this type of perspective.
- Multiple perspectivisation: in some films, the same events are displayed in sequence (as in *Rashomon*) or in parallel (as in the split screen of *Timecode*) from the perspectives of different characters or narrators.
- Variable perspectivisation: most common is changing among perspectives that are close to the several characters, but only in certain respects (see below).

The transitions between these ideal types are fluid, and hardly any film corresponds to them completely and continuously, because this would considerably limit the aesthetic possibilities. The most common structure in mainstream film consists of a frequent change of temporary, partial approaches to different characters, whereby individual main characters are preferred as centres of attention and involvement. While many independent and auteur films make it difficult to understand the character psychology, the inner life of most mainstream protagonists is rather easy to understand. The camera takes an ideal observer's perspective, moves freely among the characters, and occasionally approaches their perception, for example through POV editing. Flashbacks can show the memories or dreams of individual characters, but tend not to be used very often. A character often reflects central values. For perspectives of knowledge and feeling, general mainstream conventions are less easy to determine, as they can be handled in very different ways, often specific to a genre. Such patterns of perspectivisation deserve closer study because they achieve specific effects. Some examples:

- Compassionate knowledge superiority: we perceive many main characters in melodramas predominantly from outside and know more than they

do about their weaknesses and about the intrigues or blows of fate that threaten them. At the same time, we can share their wishes and values and, in addition to sympathy, also have similar feelings or empathy.

- Reversal of knowledge and value superiority: some films establish a superiority of the audience over the protagonist in terms of knowledge and values at the beginning, but later reverse this and put the protagonist in a superior position (often corresponding to their character arc). In *Casablanca*, we often know more than Rick in the beginning, for example about Ilsa's situation and motivation, and can critically observe his egocentrism. Later, however, only he himself knows his rescue plan and finally lives up to collective ideals through his courage and altruism.
- Comic distance: many comedies create a distance to the inner life of their main characters, thus avoiding a perspectivisation through them, at least for situational feelings.
- Visible fear: when we share the monster's view of its victims in horror films, we can see their horrified faces better, react to them, and get emotionally infected by them. At the same time, the monster remains hidden from us and therefore seems more eerie and unpredictable.
- With strange eyes: some films bring us closer to the perception of antiheroes and keep us at their level of knowledge, although we neither share nor approve of their judgements, wishes, and feelings. In *Taxi Driver* we often see through Travis's eyes and get similar information, but his sociopathic values, aggression, and murder plans are likely to repel most viewers.

If one wants to describe the spectrum of perspective structures even more generally, two further, more well-known distinctions can be made. One pole of the spectrum is formed by *monoperspective* films in which the viewers are meant to be very close to a single perspective in all essential respects. At the other end are *polyperspective* films with many characters and narrators on several levels, which all have different perspectives, to which the spectators stand in complex relations. If one concentrates on the important perspectives of judging, wishing, and feeling, one can differentiate here between more open and more closed perspective structures (cf. Pfister 1988: 101–02). *Closed* structures suggest a very specific perspective to the viewer: they are intended to be close to the values, wishes, or feelings of a narrator or character (often the protagonist), or they may develop an independent perspective different from both. This can be achieved by constellations of characters that implicitly call for taking sides, for example by contrasting 'right' with 'wrong' attitudes (e.g., in *Wall Street* the greed of the banker and the insight of his acolyte), or by grouping extreme attitudes around a 'golden mean'. *Open* perspective structures, on the other

hand, provide several character or narrator perspectives to choose from without favouring one. It is up to the viewers whether they want to join one of them and if so, which one.

Finally, I would like to indicate at least some effects that can be achieved through such forms of perspectivisation in film. Most concretely, perspectivisation makes a significant contribution to directing attention and affects and can be stimulating or irritating already at the level of basic sensation and perception, for example when parts of the image are blocked off in POV shots or a restless handheld camera is used. Linking perspective to the knowledge of unsuspecting, disturbed, or misguided characters makes it possible to hold back story information and thus generate curiosity and suspense (*Memento*). On the other hand, characters and their behaviour and experience can also be commented on and evaluated from higher-level points of view. Irony and distancing can lead to comic and satirical effects. Characters can make the viewers focus on certain values, or they can be used as mouthpieces to convey propaganda messages. The adoption of the character perspective can also make their behaviour understandable for the viewers or justify it. Alternating closeness to several characters makes it possible to compare their perspectives, to judge, to decide in favour of one of them, or to view and understand their misunderstandings and conflicts from a distance. Bringing the perspective closer to anti-heroes can to a certain extent compensate for their other deficits, their less attractive traits; in this way we can be made to understand people better, even if we would otherwise not be interested in them or avoid or reject them (*Taxi Driver*). In such ways, perspectivisation can generally contribute to deepening the insight into the limitations and subjectivity of human experience and to dealing with it more appropriately.

We started from the general question of how viewers engage with characters. The two most common alternative answers to this question are either that we look at characters from the outside and judge them, or that we share their experiences and feel with them. However, it has been shown that neither of these answers is correct in this generality. Rather, both types of affective involvement are merely the poles of a continuum. Our involvement with characters takes on different forms and degrees because it is always dependent on perspective, in several respects. First, we have certain perspectives on the characters in terms of perception/imagination, thinking, judging, desiring and feeling. Secondly, the viewers' perspectives stand to the characters' perspective in various relationships, which can range from complete discrepancy to various degrees of approximation to partial adoption, identification, or empathy. These diverse aspects of character and spectator perspectives are each directed in different ways by the film and thus develop a momentum of their own. Thus, our visual and acoustic perception is controlled by the images and sounds of the film, whereby various methods of perceptual subjectivation are employed. In terms of knowledge, narrative processes

of conveying information and guiding inferences play a crucial role. Perception and thinking, in turn, form the basis for perspectives of appraisal, desire and feeling, which are mostly influenced only indirectly (see Chapter 14). Each of these aspects of perspective change dynamically in different ways—for example, the visual perspective is usually more flexible than the acoustic one—and such multilevel changes produce various effects of suspense, curiosity, or surprise. A generalised, overarching consideration of perspective based on heuristic typologies is therefore usually not sufficient for the analysis of characters, but must be supplemented by more differentiated and detailed considerations. In my view, the perspectivity of involvement with film characters has been neglected in most theories so far, and it should be taken into account more.

A larger context of perspectival involvement with characters has also become apparent. Based on the film, viewers create mental models of characters and situations. Using folk psychology and mental simulation, they draw conclusions about the characters' inner lives from their external observations. They attribute psychological processes to them and infer their perspectives, especially the objects and experiential qualities of their perceptions, thoughts, evaluations, wishes, and feelings. Simultaneously, the viewers also develop their own perspective on the storyworld, which may coincide more or less with the characters' perspective. At the same time, the spectators have an outside observers' view on the characters and get more or less close to them 'from the inside'. So far, I have mainly dealt with the 'inside view', but the 'outside view' still needs to be examined more closely. After all, the relationships between character and spectator perspectives are an important factor of character involvement, but not the only one. In the remainder of this chapter, it will be shown that perspective relations are part of a larger system of imaginative closeness and distance to characters.

13.8 Imaginative Closeness and Distance to Characters

Viewers often speak of being or feeling 'close' to certain characters (which is, of course, a prerequisite for being 'touched' or 'moved' by them). Such phrases, often found in everyday communication but also in film reviews and psychological theories, have diverse, mostly metaphorical meanings. Clarifying these meanings can help us model more accurately the multiple processes through which viewers respond to characters. By combining findings of different theories and complementing them where necessary, we can, for example, go beyond the aspect of moral evaluation of characters that many theories emphasise and draw attention to other, frequently neglected factors of involvement. The metaphorical terms 'closeness' and 'distance' prove to be suitable starting points for modelling the network of imaginative involvement

with characters in a more differentiated way. Several interconnected relationships to characters can be brought together under these generic terms. In addition to identification, empathy and other perspective relations, these include, as we will see, the spatio-temporal accompaniment of characters, the imagination of physical closeness and several other aspects.⁴⁹

When one speaks of 'closeness' in relation to fellow human beings, this can mean various things, including spatial, temporal, physical, kinship, affective, and spiritual closeness. These types of closeness are interrelated, in contingent ways, but there are probabilistic connections between them. For example, relatives often live nearby, one knows them, wants to get along with them and be emotionally close to them. Friends or members of groups that interact in bodily proximity to each other, such as choir singers or sports teams, usually also have common interests. And vice versa, one tries to establish spatial proximity to people with whom one feels similar or emotionally close or with whom one pursues common goals.

Unlike real people, you cannot really be close to characters in such spatio-temporal and social ways, but you can *imagine* being close to them or *feel* close to them. The kinds of imaginative closeness to characters are interlinked through probabilities in a similar way as with real people, and films take advantage of this in evoking involvement. In addition, films can produce kinds of closeness that we rarely have in reality, and with only few people. For example, they can show us the faces of characters in close-up and make us witnesses of their most intimate private life. Moreover, films bring us closer to characters in ways that are impossible with our fellow human beings: we can see through the eyes of characters, hear with their ears, grasp their thoughts, experience their dreams and memories. So, there is again a profound difference between the relationships to characters and to real people, which also affects affective reactions.

Without claiming to be complete, at least five different types of closeness to characters can be distinguished. Each of them corresponds to a type of closeness to real persons and comprises certain psychological relationships, which move gradually between the poles of closeness and distance:

1. understanding and perspective: psychological relationships (a) to the physical, mental, and social features and situations of the character and (b) to their mental perspective;
2. perceived relations in space and time: spatio-temporal proximity and proxemics;
3. perceived social relations: similarity, familiarity, and social partiality;

49 Elsewhere, I have elaborated on the following thoughts with the help of an example (Eder 2006).

4. imaginary or parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSB); and
5. affective relations: feeling for and feeling with a character.

All five dimensions of closeness divide into more specific aspects and interact with each other in complex ways, forming a system or network. Most forms of closeness to characters tend to reinforce each other, but the respective context plays a crucial role. Diagram 30 shows an overview of the network of closeness. The field in the middle represents the perspective relationships discussed earlier in this chapter. All other fields concern further forms of closeness or distance that arise mainly from an external perspective.

The forms of closeness or distance to characters are based on the fundamentals of character reception explained in previous chapters (upper field of the graphic). In order to feel close to characters, they must first capture the viewers' attention, which can be achieved by narrative or aesthetic means, for example, centring in the middle of the picture, visual size, striking shape, luminant colours, movement, loud noises, speaking, or glances from other characters (Chapters 5–7). Furthermore, a central role within the character constellation like that of the protagonist can promote closeness (Chapter 10). The kind of mental model of the character and its artefact qualities also has an influence (Chapter 8): if the model is personalised, realistic, detailed, consistent, and multidimensional, the chances of feelings of closeness increase, while typified, artificial, reduced, and contradictory character models are more likely to evoke distanced reactions. An impression of distancing artificiality can also arise when a character does not belong to the reality of the depicted world but is only part of a hallucination or an embedded narrative (like Tyler Durden at the end of *Fight Club*), when the entire depicted world seems artificial (like in the music video for 'The Child', see Chapter 4), when the character conspicuously serves as a symbol (*Der müde Tod/Destiny*) or when symptomatic meanings take centre stage (see Chapter 12). For these reasons, the requirements for closeness are more easily met by individualised protagonists who conform to the character conventions of mainstream or independent realism (Chapter 8). On the audience side, of course, the viewers' self-models and identities play an important role in determining which characters they feel close to. 'Closeness' in a more emphatic sense usually also involves *affective* closeness in the form of intense, positive appraisals and affects related to the character (the two bottom fields in the diagram). I will discuss this crucial topic in Chapter 14. In the following I will first describe the primarily cognitive aspects of closeness to characters—the first four points of the above list of dimensions—in more detail, as the type and intensity of affective reactions depends crucially on them.

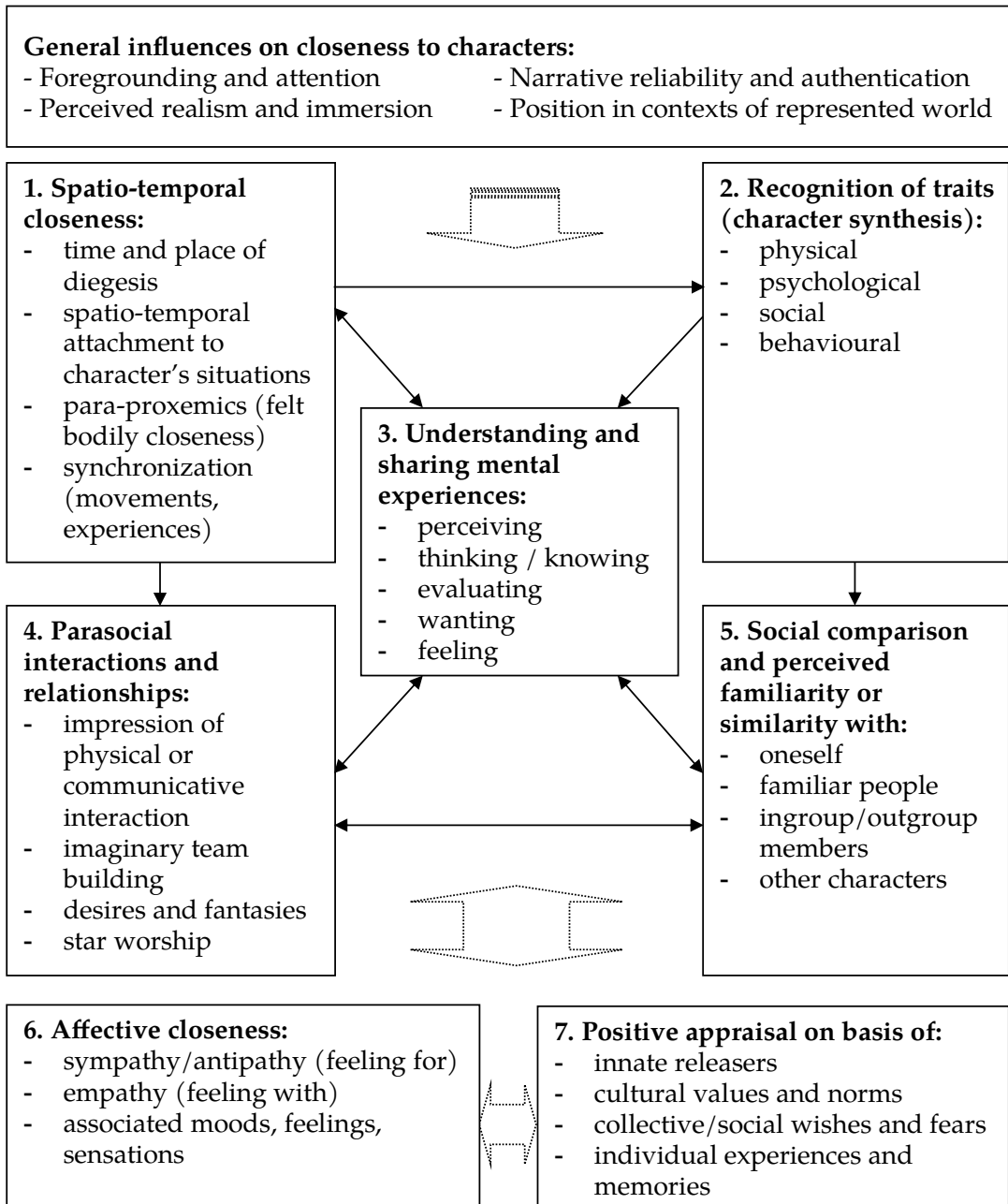


Diagram 30 System of imaginative closeness and distance to characters

Understanding and Relationships of Perspectives

Understanding characters can mean two things: recognising their traits and situations, or sharing their mental perspective in relevant aspects. Firstly, and more basically, understanding characters can mean that the audience grasps the physical, mental and social traits and forms a consistent mental model of the character (character synthesis; see Chapter 5). Films can make this easier or more difficult. One factor is the quantity and quality of information about the characters: how much do we learn about them and their characteristics, and how nuanced and relevant is this knowledge? Another factor is the mode of character synthesis that generates this knowledge. The audience can perceive the characters like distanced observers ‘from the outside’ and understand their inner lives through the cool application of everyday psychological knowledge. Or they can put themselves in their situation through simulation processes, activate their own memories and co-experience the events viscerally and affectively. There are gradual transitions and mixed forms between these poles. The previously developed distinction between typified and personalised characters is essential here. If films convey reliable information that corresponds to familiar types, the character can usually be understood immediately, but often only superficially. Otherwise, viewers develop the character model step by step, using their own experiences or empathic imagination as a guide. This usually slows down understanding, but at the same time tends to make the character more detailed, individual and striking. The intensity of such processes marks a boundary between the more easily understood characters of mainstream film and the more complex and difficult, but potentially more memorable, characters of art cinema. Other films, again, purposefully and consistently prevent the development of consistent models. Their overall contradictory or fragmentary characters lead the viewer to maintain a greater distance, as many forms of closeness require a consistent character model. This is because both evaluating a character and sharing their feelings requires understanding their essential traits.

Secondly, understanding characters can mean knowing the character’s fleeting inner life and sharing or even actively adopting this mental perspective in essential aspects. In Chapters 3, 5, and 6, I already described how we recognise the inner life and perspective of characters: We draw on a wide range of information—from linguistic expressions and outward behaviour to the nuances of nonverbal communication—and rely on a broad spectrum of mental dispositions—from the mirror neuron system to everyday psychological knowledge. The basic structures of the mental perspective can be systematically divided into the already mentioned five groups of mental processes:

1. perceptual and imaginative, e.g., sensing, seeing, hearing, hallucinating, dreaming;
2. cognitive and epistemic, e.g., thinking, knowing, and believing;
3. evaluative, e.g., judging or assessing;

4. conative or motivational, e.g., interests, wishes, goals, and plans; and
5. affective or emotional, e.g., bodily affects, emotions, and moods.

Everyday life is also perspectival in each of these respects, but the film experience is beyond that deliberately directed and *perspectivised* in certain ways. Some of these can be analysed by putting the mental perspectives of spectators, characters and narrators in relation to each other. A good starting point is the question of whose mental processes the film conveys and to what extent. A film may or may not construct personal narrators; it may privilege certain characters by conveying their inner lives in detail (e.g., protagonists vs antagonists), it may focus on certain kinds of mental processes (horror film: anxiety; detective film: cool deduction), or it may minimise or maximise the representation of mental states overall (news vs melodrama). Psychological distance to characters can thus arise not only because the viewer learns little about their inner lives, but also because both focus on different objects (the character enjoys swimming in the sea, while the viewer is afraid of a shark attack), because the same object is perceived in different ways (the drug-addicted character sees the harmless doorman as a monster), or because the mental states of characters and viewers are of different valence (the character loves dogs, the viewer hates them). The perspectives of characters, narrators and spectators can be similar or different in terms of what they refer to, in terms of the mode of experience (perception, thinking, evaluation, desires, affects) or in terms of experiential quality. Possible relations between their perspectives range from strong discrepancy—the spectators practically experience a different world than the characters—to broad identity—the spectators experience the same objects very similarly. Moreover, the spectators can just happen to share the characters' perspective, or they can actively adopt it. Through such distinctions, commonalities, and discrepancies of mental perspectives can be described in more differentiated ways.

Perspective relationships to characters tend to be closely related regarding their effects (see also Gaut 1999: 208–11). For example, approximating the perception of a character may help to understand their emotions. When you see the same thing as the character, you can often imagine what they feel. (This does not necessarily trigger empathy or sympathy: you do not have to sympathise with a killer who enjoys watching the suffering victim.) Since one often acquires knowledge through perception, subjective camera and subjective sound also bring one closer to the character's knowledge. On the other hand, subjective shots make it harder to depict the character's actions; when you see the same thing as they do, you often recognise less clearly what they are doing and what emotions they express (Smith 1995: 157). A subjective camera, such as the panic-stricken one in *The Blair Witch Project*, can certainly convey feelings. Usually, however, one learns more about the feelings of characters through body language, dialogues, voice-over, music, setting, or editing (ibid.: 165). Above all, the expressive reaction shot, a shot that shows the characters facial expression, provides emotional information and can promote empathy and sympathy (ibid.: 158).

The relationships between spectator and character perspectives as well as between the spectators' mental models of themselves and of the characters are still largely unexplored. For the time being, we can say that understanding represented beings means, firstly, knowing their permanent traits and, secondly, grasping their temporary experiences. Both are closely related. The understanding of a character's inner life can range from merely abstract and general knowledge of it to its active, living simulation in detail. In everyday life, most people only get to know small bits of the intimate experiences and hidden motives of a few people; in the cinema they regularly come close to characters in this way. This understanding, however, is *aspectual and partial*. One can share the perception of characters whose feelings one cannot guess; one can know more than characters whose interests one shares; one can even empathise with characters whose values one rejects. A viewer can alternate between the perceptual perspectives of an idealised hero and a sadistic killer, evaluate their contrasting goals differently, and still feel truly close to neither of them. Nevertheless, the emotions and motives of the characters are especially important—being able to relate to the corresponding character perspective seems to be a prerequisite for feeling close in a real sense. In this respect, screenwriting guides point out that it is usually more important to share the actual, well-understood needs of a character than their external goals (wants) (Newman 2001; see Chapter 9). As tragedies and screwball comedies show, the two do not have to be the same: their, in our view, 'wrong' desires drive the characters of these genres to their downfall, into the arms of unsuitable love partners, or both.

Spatio-Temporal Closeness

The impression of being close to a character in space and time has at least three aspects: (1) the general relationship between the character's setting and the spectator's environment; (2) the bodily-situational feeling of sharing the same space with the character and being synchronised with the character in time; and (3) the accompaniment of the character through spaces over time.

The first point concerns general differences between the place and time of the character and the multiple places and times of different viewers who see the film in various countries and cities, whether in the cinema, at home or on the road. *Casablanca* is set in 1940s Morocco, for Rick—though not for Ilsa and the other refugees—a familiar place. Many viewers, on the other hand, might experience this place as foreign, perhaps exotic, but above all the time of the story as a distant past (which can certainly help the film's nostalgic effect). For contemporary US audiences in the 1940s, again, a direct connection to the political reality of the Second World War was recognisable, by which they themselves were also affected. Moroccans, finally, could perceive the setting then as now as unrealistic, as deformed by a Western Orientalist view. The closer the connection between the film's chronotope and the lifeworld of certain viewers, the more likely they are to associate their own experiences, memories,

and specific cultural knowledge with the film and its characters. On the one hand, this can make it easier to understand the characters better and can reinforce further forms of closeness to them; but it can also lead to distancing if the film noticeably deviates from one's own perception of reality or corresponds to it just enough for a routinised perception to set in.

The second aspect of spatio-temporal proximity concerns the feeling of bodily-situational proximity to characters, which is created through framing and editing. Joshua Meyrowitz uses the term *para-proxemics* (1986) for this. Accordingly, shot sizes and camera positions correspond to the way in which people perceive and react to interpersonal spatial distances in direct contact. Meyrowitz draws on Edward T. Hall's conception of proxemics, interpersonal proximity behaviour, and on this basis distinguishes between four spatial zones that regulate the self-chosen distances between people: intimate, personal, social, and public zone (Meyrowitz 1986: 255). Depending on the nature of their relationship with the other person, the purpose of their interaction and the subject of their communication, people choose a certain zone and a certain distance; gestures, volume, and style of speech vary with the distance between people. A test: try discussing an intimate topic from a distance of five metres or conducting a job interview from a distance of ten centimetres. Standard distances vary culturally: in some cultures greater physical proximity is common, in others greater distance, which can lead to problems in intercultural communication (ibid.: 255f.).

Expressions such as 'close-up' show that the perception of distance plays an important role in the effect of cinematic shot sizes. The relative size of an object depicted within the frame influences not only the recognition of details but also feelings towards the object, it suggests a certain *mediated distance* between character and spectator (ibid.: 258) and activates mental schemata of proximity behaviour. This felt distance influences the perception of the characters. By framing them in intimate, personal, social or public zones of spatial interaction, they can be perceived, for example, more like personal acquaintances in a closer shot or more in their social function in a wider shot. Actions shown in a long shot often appear more abstract, while close-ups focus attention on details of individual appearance and expressive behaviour (ibid.: 261). In this way, for example, in a court room drama, a close-up can emphasise the personal feelings of the judge or a wide shot can emphasise their social role. The choice of shot size can also influence the intensity of affects: a murder or a kiss tends to be more intense in close-ups than in long shots. In *Casablanca*, a high degree of para-proxemic closeness to Rick and Ilsa is repeatedly established, so the close framing of their farewell dialogue intensifies its emotional effect, letting the audience into their intimate space.

Viewers also react to the *depicted distance* between characters and their environment. This can be captured not only from an outside observer position, but also from the perceptual perspective of a character involved. Subjective shots or dialogues in the shot-counter-shot pattern suggest distances even when only one person is visible in an interaction (ibid.: 262).

This can be used to create strong effects, such as the impression of affective closeness by showing two characters in a two-shot as objectively far away from each other, but alternately bringing their respective counterparts close in their subjective POV shots. Or vice versa: one can show the estrangement between two people by increasing their subjectively perceived distance through the use of a wide-angle lens. In addition to such forms of perceived spatial closeness, narrative timing, body movements in the image, rhythms of the image and sound can also create a closeness in the subjective sense of time: the audience can be rhythmically synchronised with characters and their bodily actions. This is particularly evident in music and dance scenes when the audience's feet bob along with the beat, or in action scenes when spectators flinch before a punch.

A third, already mentioned, aspect of spatio-temporal closeness concerns the viewers' (mainly external) perspective on characters and the events they are involved in and experience. This *external experience perspective* refers to the extent to which a film enables viewers to accompany the character through space and time in the depicted world (similar to Chatman's concept of 'center', 1986; or Smith's 'spatio-temporal attachment', 1995: 142). The duration and quantity of the information provided by the film enables viewers to observe characters' experiences more or less closely. In the case of close attachment, the essential, formative experiences of the character (such as wounds, loves, achievements) are predominantly presented audiovisually at some time in the film. Distance, on the other hand, can arise when relevant experiences of the character are excluded, hidden or marginalised, for example, when they are not shown in vivid, detailed sound and vision, but are only briefly glimpsed or mentioned in passing (telling vs showing, speech vs audiovisual).⁵⁰ In the case of protagonists, for example, the origins of their motives for action are usually presented vividly, whereas in the case of antagonists they are often not.

The attribution of an experience perspective initially only means that a character is the focus of attention, but not how they are perceived. However, there are causal connections here. When viewers accompany a character spatio-temporally, this usually not only influences their knowledge of them, but also promotes feelings of sympathy through the so-called mere-exposure effect: one tends to react more positively to people whom one frequently encounters (Bornstein 1999). Following a character through space and time as an external observer also increases the likelihood of coming closer to their knowledge, interest, and value perspective. The spatio-temporal attachment suggests that character and spectator perceive the same situations and share a space of perception and meaning that offers them similar possibilities of seeing and hearing, thinking, feeling and acting (Persson 2003: 70; Barratt 2006). This shared space, as the object domain of the mental perspective, at the same time provides a basis for assessing the meaning of the depicted situation for the character and their interests (cf. Tan 1996: 44). Their affective perspective becomes clear by observing their expressive behaviour: are they laughing, crying, writhing

50 Smith uses the metaphor of characters serving as 'screens' or 'filters' for the audience. Like screens, they show spatial and temporal pictures of parts of the character's life from a particular perspective and as filters they select what information is provided and what is left out (Smith 1995: 142).

in pain? From this, in turn, conclusions can be drawn about their motivational perspective: Why do they behave this way, and how will they act now when they have these feelings? In such ways, the spatio-temporal accompaniment of the character can provide access to their inner life. In doing so, the viewers often develop their own perspective of interest by taking sides with the character's subjective wants or well-understood needs (see Chapter 9). Such forms of imaginative support for the characters can lead to a better understanding of their personality and to intense sympathy. In short, the spatio-temporal forms of closeness are tightly linked to the understanding of characters and their mental perspectives.

Parasocial Interaction and Perceived Social Relationships

More detailed studies are available on *parasocial interaction* (see Giles 2002 and above), so I will only briefly discuss this aspect of closeness to characters here. As already mentioned, 'parasocial interaction' is often used in communication studies as an umbrella term for all kinds of audience reactions to any person represented in media.⁵¹ More convincing, however, are narrower definitions that distinguish parasocial interaction from other forms of involvement and do not blur the essential differences between (inter-)action, mere observation, and simulative perspective taking (cf. e.g., Grodal 2001, Cohen 2006). After all, viewers rarely face characters like interaction partners, they more frequently relate to them like unnoticed observers, or simulate their subjective perspectives and can even share perceptual experiences. Therefore, I use the term parasocial interaction only for cases where viewers imagine not only observing the characters but actually interacting with them (e.g., helping them), or where they respond to the characters' perceived verbal and nonverbal behaviour in ways that correspond to real face-to-face situations (for example, with the feeling of being looked at). These cases are not uncommon in audiovisual media, but usually remain limited to certain genres or short passages. Originally, the concept of parasocial interaction was developed using the example of television news or shows in which the presenters seem to address the audience directly. In some feature films, something similar happens when characters break the fourth wall and look directly into the camera, like Travis Bickle in Figure 46. But such cases remain an exception. Only certain fictional genres such as pornography or horror regularly use forms of parasocial interaction, for example to evoke imaginations of having sex with represented persons or being attacked by monsters.

Far more common and fundamental than these specific instances of imagined interaction are the reactions of spectators to the social categorisation of characters (see Chapter 5, Chapter 6, and Chapter 10). Once viewers have developed a mental model of a character and their inner life, they can relate it to other characters as well as to real people, including themselves or acquaintances. Conscious social comparisons or preconscious biases and associations can create the feeling that the character is familiar

51 See, for instance, Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm 2006. Parasocial relationships additionally require repeated interaction with the same media persona (Gleich 1997).

or even similar to the viewer. This feeling can be reinforced if the viewer accompanies the character through space and time and shares their mental perspective. On a general level, the perceived social relations between viewers and characters can be described using social psychological concepts of social identity, social distance and social group membership.⁵² Feminist, queer, and postcolonial theory and cultural studies emphasise categories such as race, class, gender and sexual orientation in this context.⁵³ The concept of imaginative closeness and distance also has close links to the concept of 'othering'. This separation between 'us' and 'the others' involves distancing oneself from certain (usually marginalised) social out-groups, which are devalued in order to elevate oneself and one's own in-group and confirm one's own 'normality' or dominance.

According to social psychology, perceived similarity with others generally contributes to interpersonal attraction and liking, and similarities in basic attitudes and values seem to be particularly significant (Reis 1999: 58–59). Moreover, similarity to others tends to facilitate understanding of them and reassure one's own view of the world. On the other hand, differences in age, gender, milieu, ethnicity, and other dimensions can separate social groups and negatively affect the ability to understand other people or characters. The social perception, categorisation, and evaluation of characters is most probably shaped by relevant auto- and hetero-stereotypes as well as tendencies such as ethnocentrism, conformity to norms, preference of the own group, and differentiation from other groups, as described in social psychology (e.g., Hogg 1999). In this way, viewers can perceive a character as a member of their in-group, associate them with collective values and interests, and react with sympathy. If, on the other hand, the character is perceived as a member of an out-group or cannot be classified, viewers can react to them with increased stereotyping or antipathy, or they can perceive them as 'exotic and fascinating'. Such group-specific processes are particularly evident in the extremely diverging audience reactions to protagonists of 'cult movies' such as *A Clockwork Orange* or propaganda films such as *Jud Süß*. Certain group-related processes of character involvement are therefore dealt with in studies on cinematic stereotyping (e.g., Berg 2002: 13–65), but also in some screenwriting manuals (e.g., Zag 2005: 38–60). Not least, the group structure of the character constellation plays a role here (see Chapter 10). The heroes from the dominant in-group—in Hollywood cinema mostly white male US citizens—are often juxtaposed with members of an out-group as antagonists. Members of further social groups may appear as less idealised characters who act as helpers to the heroes or are protected by them.

The specificity of social closeness to characters increases when they are not only associated with general social groups to which viewers also feel they belong, but with more concrete social roles that viewers know from their own experience, for example

52 For an overview cf. the key words 'group processes', 'social categorisation', 'social cognition', 'social comparison', 'social identity theory', and 'social perception' in Manstead and Hewstone 1999 as well as the introduction in Godersky 2000.

53 See, for instance, Hall 2004, Fiske 1997: Chapter 9; Benshoff and Griffin 2004.

from their professional or family life. Since roles are strongly linked to patterns of social interaction, it is likely that emotional memories, internalised values and impulses to act are triggered by these roles. Consequently, if the portrayal is sufficiently realistic, parents, for example, are likely to feel a greater closeness to parental figures than childless people or teenagers. The importance of such *role identifications* is considered central by some authors (e.g., Schürmeier 1996; Anderson 1996: 138–43), but it is only one relevant aspect of the larger context outlined here. Thus, a specific closeness or distance to a character can also arise if the character (regardless of their social roles) resembles a very *specific person* whom the viewer knows and loves or hates, be it a celebrity or an acquaintance. And more importantly, viewers can compare characters with their *own self-image*, their personal identity, and gain the impression that a character is like themselves in relevant ways, especially concerning crucial personality traits. Such a social comparison may sometimes lead to negative reactions such as shame or embarrassment, but more often to a positive appraisal or ‘similarity identification’ (Andringa 2004).

Another important outcome of social comparisons with characters is the viewers’ impression that the characters are equal, superior or inferior to them in terms of status or ability (Suls and Martin 1999, see also the model of ‘identification with the hero’ by Jauß 1984). Characters whose beauty, strength, status, eloquence, elegance, or intelligence are perceived as superior often evoke feelings of admiration (or envy), while characters who are perceived as inferior in relevant areas may evoke contempt (or pity). When viewers perceive a character as superior, this can trigger a desire to be like that character, which in turn can increase the willingness to understand them and adopt their perspective. Both processes in turn reinforce forms of affective closeness. Such phenomena have been treated from a psychoanalytic viewpoint as ‘wish identification’ (Andringa 2004); Berys Gaut describes them as the audience’s imagination of possessing certain physical, psychological, and social strengths of the character themselves (1999). Such processes could be further illuminated by psychological insights into social cognition (see Chapter 6).

Social closeness to characters (in the form of perceived familiarity, similarity, superiority or group membership, as well as role, similarity or wish identification) is used in films in very different ways. Some films use it for propaganda purposes, while others break down existing social boundaries by mitigating differences, counteracting stereotypes, changing entrenched thought patterns and making viewers approach those very characters who are different from themselves. An effective way to evoke feelings of closeness to such strange characters is to create a familiarity with their perspectives, conflicts and experiences through cinematic means, including the forms of perspectival and spatio-temporal closeness mentioned above.

Erving Goffman’s concept of impression management, the self-presentation of persons in social roles, can help to describe further forms of social closeness (see Meyrowitz 1986: 263–68). Characters are often first characterised by their appearance, then by their behaviour, which may contradict first impressions. Films can purposefully direct such everyday forms of social categorisation. Among other things, they can make characters seem like members of a team to which the audience also belongs, a closely familiar

group with common goals, a close-knit community. Views behind the characters' public self-presentation, their impression management, can contribute to this. According to Goffman, people enact their behaviour in social roles like actors on a stage, but behind this stage of public social interaction, they behave differently. Doctors in a hospital must not show their doubts, feelings or antipathies towards their patients, but in a relaxed atmosphere with colleagues, they may joke or complain about their work (Meyrowitz 1986: 265). By showing viewers some characters outside their social roles—the doctor at home in bed with their spouse—and revealing their private feelings, desires and fears, films can establish a relationship of familiarity and understanding with them that they deny to other characters seen only in their public roles.

The spatio-temporal accompaniment of the characters as well as the closeness to their perspectives have an impact on the extent to which we perceive them as familiar in their intimacy or more distant as mere representatives of social roles. For example, the order in which the audience gains access to the 'backstage area' behind the characters' social role-play can be important in which 'character team' they are more likely to associate with. For example, whom do they get to know in private situations first in a crime thriller, the police or the gangsters, and whom do they see more often outside their professional roles? Attachment to one side and denial of access to the other is particularly pronounced in war films and Westerns (Meyrowitz 1986: 267). The portrayal is often literally one-sided: 'them there' shooting at 'us here'. So when conflicts between characters are depicted, it is important to ask who is up against whom from the audience's point of view: two strangers to the audience against each other? A stranger against a team member of the audience? Or two team members of the audience against each other?

Summary

My goal was to show that there are at least five different ways to feel imaginatively close to characters: spatio-temporal closeness; cognitive closeness through understanding and perspective; social closeness through familiarity, similarity, and group belonging; parasocial interaction; and affective closeness. These are not necessary and sufficient conditions for closeness in a strong sense, but merely factors with a certain tendency to have an effect, which interact with one another in complex ways (see Diagram 30). It is always possible to feel close to one character in one way and not to another; it is even possible that closeness in one respect presupposes distance in another.

Nevertheless, the different types of imaginative closeness are not randomly connected. It is a systematic relationship, even if it is not based on rigid rules or laws. This interconnection makes it also clear why in some respects one can be closer to fictional figures than real people, while in other respects there is an irreducible distance. Above all, however, it could help us understand the various strategies of films and other media better than before and analyse them in more detail. The system of imaginative closeness completes our current picture of involvement with characters by combining the findings of cognitive theories and social psychology, taking into account neglected relationships, and paying more attention to how

factors interact. In this way, a core area of character reception can be analysed more precisely.

A brief look at our recurring example may illustrate this. In *Casablanca*, the structure of closeness is developed roughly in the following way. The place and time of the story position the world of the characters at an exotic, nostalgic distance for today's viewers, while for contemporary viewers it was closer to political reality. The experience perspective (spatio-temporal attachment) is largely focused on the protagonist Rick Blaine, whose fairly consistent character model corresponds to the basic pattern of mainstream realism. As a male, white American around forty, an opponent of the Nazis, and a cynical café owner disappointed by life and love, with high social status and to a large degree able to act as he will, Rick combines a specific constellation of social group affiliations, roles, and personality traits that come varyingly close to those of different viewers and offer them different possibilities of closeness. The most significant differences regarding status and agency are with Ilsa as a woman, with Strasser and the other Nazi Germans, with Sam as an African American, and with the European refugees. Rick is constantly present on screen and in the dialogue, with a few exceptions—especially the delayed introduction of the character and some digressions to Ilsa and Laszlo. The experience perspective also allows the spectators a glimpse behind the scenes of his social roles when he desperately gets drunk and Ilsa visits him in his apartment. This is not the case with other characters. Rick is also the only one whose inner life is also conveyed visually, in the form of the flashback to the time in Paris with Ilsa. The para-proxemic closeness to Rick is also particularly pronounced; he and Ilsa have the most medium close shots and close-ups. In some situations, framing and editing approach the two characters' perspectives on each other, but a look into the camera or similarly strong signals of parasocial interaction are avoided. The film focuses on Rick's experiences and his face, the numerous dialogues about his inner life, the flashback, the musical creation of fitting moods, the occasional approach to his visual point of view, and the subtle suggestion of inner processes through camera work (such as Rick standing alone in a long shot before carrying out his rescue plan)—many such formal devices work together to help bring the viewer closer to his perspective of perception, knowledge, evaluation, wishes, and feelings than to those of others, including Ilsa.

Through such formal strategies, films can promote the understanding of other people's perspectives; they can convey world views, open up new insights, evoke empathy, and break up processes of habituation. Films can use the imaginative closeness to characters for purposes of art and entertainment or instrumentalise it for propaganda and advertising. The modelling of relationships of imaginative closeness is a key to understanding these possibilities. The model proposed here is basically compatible with the theories of character engagement, identification, or parasocial interaction outlined above (Smith 1995; Cowie 1997; Hoorn and Konijn 2003; Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm 2006). However, it shows some possibilities of their connection and integration, and it adds the essential aspect of perspective, which has been neglected. Furthermore, it forms a basis for a more precise conceptualisation and explanation of affective involvement. This is the subject of the following chapter.

13.9 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions on Perspective and Imaginative Closeness

1. What do viewers learn about the characters, their inward and outward experiences, and what not? Which patterns of the provision of information are there in a given sequence or in the film as a whole?
 - What do viewers know about the physicality, psyche, and sociality of the characters? Which characters do you learn the most about?
 - Is relevant information withheld so that secrets are created?
 - Are there characters about whose psyche you learn almost nothing (e.g., enemy soldiers in war movies) or about whose bodies you learn almost nothing (e.g., voice-over narrators)?
2. What relationships of external experience perspectives, spatio-temporal proximity, and para-proxemics are developed with the characters?
 - What is the audience's external experience perspective? Which characters do they accompany in their spatio-temporal experiences, seeing, and hearing? What does it tell them?
 - Which of the characters' relevant experiences are not depicted vividly and visually, but only briefly conveyed in words? With what effect?
 - Which characters seem to be spatially close to the viewers, e.g., through close-ups, and which ones rather distant? Does their closeness seem positive or threatening?
 - With which characters are the viewers synchronised in time and rhythm, for example through movement and editing?
3. How close do the characters appear socially?
 - Do they belong to the viewers' in-groups or to their out-groups? Do they perform familiar social roles, and which ones? Do they resemble well-known people or the viewers themselves in some significant sense? Does the star image play a role?
 - Are the private lives of the characters shown, or do we only see them in public roles? Which character do the viewers see as a confidante, which as the bearer of a role? Which characters are perceived like allies or team members by the audience? What effects are achieved?
 - Does the film aim at a parasocial closeness, are fantasies of social interactions and relationships with the characters encouraged? Do characters signal a communicative face-to-face interaction, do they seem to address the audience directly?

4. What are the relationships of perspective among characters, viewers, and other perspective carriers (narrators, filmmakers, the film as a whole)?

- Are there narrative instances within the film, and if so, what is their perspective?
- What external perspective do viewers have on the character? And what is the relationship between their perspective on the character and the perspective of narrative instances, or the filmmakers?
- Which characters function as agents, which (also) as narrators or filters? How are these roles allocated among them and in what ways?
- What is the viewers' external perspective on the characters and their situation? What filmic means and strategies are used to present and comment on the situation?
- How can the overall perspective structure be described? Is it mono- or polyperspectival, closed or open? Is the depicted world apparently directly accessible, or is some subjective perspective given by filmmakers, narrators, or characters? Is the perspective fixed, variable, or multiple?

5. Which mental perspective do the characters have on the events in terms of perception, thinking, judgements, wishes, and feelings?

- How do the characters perceive the situation? What do they focus their attention on? What do they see and hear and in what way? What other sensory perceptions do they have? Is their perception clouded or changed? What are they imagining, hallucinating, dreaming?
- What do the characters know, think, remember, infer? Which relevant facts do they not know, remember, and recognise?
- Which judgements, desires, and interests move the characters? What do they want and what not? Are there conflicts of motivation, e.g., between emotion and reason, conscious goals and unconscious needs?
- What emotions, moods, and sensations do the characters have, and what triggers these feelings?
- How do the perception, thinking, judgements, values, wishes, and feelings of the characters develop throughout the film? What is typical for the individual characters? Are there striking differences between the mental perspectives of different ones, such as protagonists and antagonists?

6. What is the mental perspective of the audience, and what is the relationship between the perspective of the audience and the perspective of the characters? Are they discrepant, similar, or the same?

- Do viewers know the character's perspective at the given point in time,

or does it only become apparent later? Which characters do viewers have subjective access to and which not? Which are psychologically transparent, which are opaque?

- What does the character perceive, what does the viewer perceive? What does the character know and feel, and what does the viewer feel? Do viewers judge the situation similarly to the character or differently? What are the interests of the character, what are the interests of the audience? To which motives and interests do the viewers feel closest to? Whose values is the audience intended to agree with?
- Which forms of visual subjectivation through subjective camera, POV patterns, perception shots, mindscreen, or other means are used? What strategies of subjective sound?

7. Are the viewers invited to actively adopt the perspective of a certain character, do they identify with the character, and in what respects?

- Do they identify with other characters in other respects?
- Are affective identification and empathy triggered?
- How do the various aspects of identification, such as perceptual, cognitive, and affective identification, or similarity, role, and wish identification, influence each other in the course of the film?

8. How do the different types of imaginative closeness interact, i.e., knowledge about the characters traits and circumstances; spatio-temporal proximity, experience perspective, para-proxemics, synchronisation; perspective relationships; social closeness; parasocial interaction; affective closeness? Which patterns can be recognised in their combination?

- Are the experience perspective and the access to subjectivity limited exclusively to one character or distributed across several characters? Which ones, and with what effect?
- What degree of imaginative closeness or distance to the characters is produced overall across the situations of the film? Does this correspond to a typical pattern, e.g., closeness to the protagonist, distance to the antagonist?
- Are there significant changes in closeness and distance to the characters in the course of the film?
- What purposes are pursued with this pattern of closeness and distance to certain characters, what functions is it supposed to fulfil (for instance in terms of entertainment, enlightenment, ideology, propaganda)?

14. Affective Involvement with Characters: Sympathy, Empathy, and Beyond

One of the main reasons we use films and other media is because they evoke emotions, moods, and other affects, and one of the main reasons media evoke affects is because of their characters. Affective responses to characters have real consequences for our lives: they guide our perceptions and experiences; shape the way we construct meaning and memories; and influence our values, identities and actions. But in what ways do characters elicit affects in their viewers? How do they manage to captivate us and evoke such different feelings as the protagonists of *Casablanca* or *Alien*, *The Marriage of Maria Braun* or *Yellow Fever*? Why do some characters fascinate us while others bore us? How is it that we feel intense affection for some of them and maintain a cold distance from others? How can we like people in the media who we would avoid or fear in everyday life? And how do our character-based affects and emotions relate to the norms and values of cultures and social groups?

Such questions are of great importance for media practice, interpretation, and criticism, where we are faced with the task of explaining specific audience reactions. However, both everyday talk and academic disciplines often fail to adequately understand involvement with characters because they start from overly simplistic ideas. Most common are approaches that refer either to identification/simulation or to evaluation/appraisal.¹ According to the *identification approach*, affective involvement with characters arises through the adoption of their situational feelings: Ilsa is distraught about her separation from Rick, so we are too. According to the *evaluation approach*, in contrast, emotions arise from judging characters from the outside, mostly according to moral standards. Consequently, Rick arouses admiration because he renounces his great love in order to fight for a higher cause. However, as the previous chapter has shown, these two approaches not only lead to contradictory results, but also seem inadequate for other reasons. After all, viewers can *both* evaluate and identify

¹ The identification approach seems to be particularly prevalent in the film industry, the evaluation/appraisal approach in media psychology (which tells us something about the mindset of these fields of practice).

with a character. Furthermore, individual characters are embedded in the larger system of a character constellation placing the audience in different and dynamically changing relationships of closeness or distance to several characters. Finally, viewers react to characters not only as depicted beings whom they judge or with whom they identify, but also as more or less well-made artefacts, as symbols that convey specific worldviews, and as symptoms of certain causes and effects in the real world (see Chapter 4).

At the beginning of Chapter 13, we have already seen that even the most advanced theories struggle to analyse character involvement comprehensively. In the following, I will therefore develop an alternative, integrative approach. To do so, I will first give a brief overview of general relationships between media and affects/emotions. On this basis, I will identify the main kinds and cues of affective involvement with characters, determine some major tendencies of audience reactions and outline a heuristic framework for analysis. Finally, I will apply this framework to the example of *Casablanca* again.

14.1 A Theoretical Basis: Concepts and Layers of Cinematic Affect

The relationships between media and affects/emotions are the subject of very different research strands, and since the first publication of this book, the number of studies has increased enormously. Although I have revised this chapter more than the others, I can only refer to few selected works here. Nevertheless, I hope to show that my approach to viewers' affective involvement with characters is supported by arguments from major current theories.² My considerations focus on film, a medium with its own specific kind of affectivity (Eder 2022). However, most of the gaps and conflicts in media-related theories of affect/emotion lie on a more general level beyond media specificity and arise from fundamentally different understandings of affective phenomena. I will focus on that, and therefore most of the following can also be applied to media other than film.

Affective reactions to films and other media develop in three phases (Hasebrink 2003): first, a film is chosen because it promises certain affective experiences (signalled, for example, by advertisements, stars or genres). Then, viewers react affectively while watching the film. And when they later think or talk about it, this is also accompanied by affects. Characters play crucial roles in all three phases, but most research, including this chapter, focuses on the fleeting affective experiences during reception, which are of central importance but notoriously elusive. Introspection, surveys, or the measurement of bodily reactions are only insufficient indicators of affects, and for

2 My arguments are based on previous work that discusses certain aspects in more detail, e.g., Eder 2003a; 2006; 2007b; 2008a; Eder and Keil 2005a. My position in relation to more recent theories is clarified, for instance, in Eder 2016b; 2018; Eder, Hanich, and Stadler 2019. The following also draws on earlier chapters of this book (particularly Chapters 3 to 6).

most historical, future, and current audiences they are not even available. Documents from the time before and after reception, such as adverts, interviews, reviews, or social media comments, also only provide an incomplete picture, and the documented audience responses often differ greatly. In the case of amoral protagonists in scandalous films such as *A Clockwork Orange*, for example, the audience seems to split into the enthusiastic and the outraged (Eder 2007a), and promising different affects to different target groups is a well-known strategy of Hollywood films (*Titanic* is simultaneously advertised as a love story and a disaster movie; see Maltby 2003: Chapter 1).

Generally, those who want to understand affective reactions to films are thus confronted with a question with several variables:

Who experiences which affects in which phases of watching which film in which context—and why?

This question means that any theory must be able to model at least three categories: affects/emotions, their cinematic elicitors, and the conceptual or causal connections between the two (Eder 2003a). Furthermore, theories must clarify whose affects they are actually dealing with: the viewers' affects must not be confused with the affects portrayed in the film or expressed by characters, narrators, or filmmakers. Many theories do not sufficiently differentiate between the representation, expression, and triggering of affects. When films *represent* affects, e.g., through the behaviour of their characters (Feng and O'Halloran 2013), this can be done in a very matter-of-fact way. That films *express* affects, on the other hand, means that their form is associated with certain affective potentials, such as sombre images with a sombre mood, or that filmmakers reveal their emotions to viewers (Robinson 2007). Thus, the fact that films represent, or express certain emotions does not at all mean that they also *elicit* the same emotions in their viewers: they may well be amused by sad characters or the overly expressive style of their portrayal. This chapter concentrates on questions of the elicitation of audience affect and only includes the representation and expression of characters' affects in this context (however, see Chapter 6, Chapter 7, and Chapter 8).

The very notion of audience affect is also ambiguous: are analysers talking about their own feelings, about the actual or probable affects of other viewers in the past, present or future, about the responses intended by the filmmakers, or about the affects that would be appropriate from a normative point of view (e.g., that of a moral subject or an aesthetic connoisseur)? Different data and methods are relevant for each of these cases. However, they all require a general model of the relations between films and viewers' experiences. So, all theories on the cinematic elicitation of affects have some fundamental questions in common that this chapter will explore: What are affects/emotions? How do they arise? Which film structures evoke which affects and why? And which is the specific role of characters in this context?

The existing theories already conceptualise affective phenomena in very different ways, starting with their generic umbrella term: some use 'emotion', others 'affect' or

‘feeling’, and all these terms have various more specific meanings.³ Nevertheless, a broad consensus has emerged to differentiate between three basic types of affective phenomena (e.g., Plantinga 2009):⁴ *emotions* in the narrower sense, such as the fear of something, are conscious, intense, and relatively short-term mental states directed at a specific object. Their objects may be persons and events (Romeo longs for Juliet and fears that he will never see her again), or other things, including objects of imagination or thought like ghosts or world peace. In contrast, *moods* such as sadness, euphoria, or boredom have no specific object, and are therefore more diffuse than emotions and tend to last longer. A sad mood, for example, can be created subliminally by images of grey landscapes and the lamenting tone of an oboe. *Affects* in the narrower sense, such as being startled by a sudden bang, are preconscious, objectless, often short-term and intense bodily processes, usually centring on sensations or proprioception. For example, the delicacies shown in *Eat Drink Man Woman* can stimulate the viewers’ appetite, a shaking hand-held camera as in *The Blair Witch Project* can cause nausea, or the skewed composition of images in expressionist films can create ‘visual tension’ (Mikunda 1986). As we will see, characters can evoke or be associated with all three kinds of affective phenomena: object-directed emotions, diffuse moods, and bodily affects. Moreover, they can relate to further affective phenomena which are discussed less frequently, such as ‘existential feelings’ (Eder 2016b).

Most recent theories understand affective phenomena as multidimensional, dynamic processes that develop over time in response to external or internal stimuli.⁵ Accordingly, the precondition for the emergence of an emotion, mood, or bodily affect is the sensation, perception or imagination of an affective stimulus or cue. This can be the perception of external objects, such as a melody, a snake, an utterance, or a picture, but also mere imagination, such as daydreams about a loved one, or the proprioception

3 About the different uses of ‘emotion’, ‘affect’, ‘feeling’, ‘mood’, and ‘sentiment’ see also Otto, Euler, and Mandl 2000; Schönplüg 2000; Wulff 1999b; Kaczmarek 1999).

4 Cf. also the various categorial differentiations in Husserl 1993: Chapter 5, Paragraphs 16ff.; Broad 1971a; Solomon 1993: Chapters 3–5; Carroll 1999: 21; Damasio 2005: Chapter 7; or Musil 1978: 1196ff.

5 Cf. Eder and Keil 2005a; Bartsch and Hübner 2004; van Reekum 2000. Kleinginna and Kleinginna distilled the following definition from one hundred psychological definitions of emotion in an attempt to find a consensual working definition: ‘An emotion is a complex structure of the interaction of subjective and objective factors that is transmitted by neuronal/hormonal systems that can trigger (a) affective experiences such as feelings of excitement or pleasure/aversion, (b) cognitive processes such as emotionally relevant perceptions, judgements, processes of categorisation, (c) extensive physiological processes of adaptation to the conditions of the stimuli, (d) behaviour that often is expressive, goal-oriented, and adaptive’ (Kleinginna and Kleinginna 1981, qtd. in Otto, Euler, and Mandl 2000: 15). My definition differs in that I view (a) not just as a possibility, but a necessary condition and that I would not equate emotions with factors, but rather understand them to be temporal processes. In this respect, my definition is closer to Klaus Scherer’s: ‘Amotion is an episode of the temporal synchronisation of all important subsystems of the organism, consisting of five components (cognition, physiological regulation, motivation, motor expression, and monitoring/feeling) and that are a response to the evaluation of an external or internal stimulus as being relevant to the central needs and goals of the organism’ (Scherer 1993; qtd. in Otto, Euler, and Mandl 2000: 15). However, contrary to this, I believe emotions are not conceptually located at the level of the organism and that their stimuli must not necessarily be linked to ‘central needs and goals of the organism’.

of internal physical processes, such as muscle tension or loss of balance. The sensation, perception, or imagination of real-world or cinematic cues then triggers an interplay of further physical reactions, action tendencies and expressive impulses, which go hand in hand with various cognitions. In any case, the initial stimulus perceptions trigger body reactions. Neurons fire, hormones are released, heartbeat and breathing accelerate or slow down, the skin begins to sweat, hair stands up, eyes widen, muscles contract—the body gets into a changed state of arousal and activity (or relaxation). In most cases, stimulus perceptions and physical reactions also lead to a change in action tendencies and to certain behavioural tendencies like aversion or affection, flight or aggression. Some of these tendencies are expressive and signal the affective reaction outwards, as a change in posture, movement, facial expression, laughter, crying, screaming, or speaking.

Affects can be aroused and influenced by both conscious and unconscious processes, including innate stimulus-response patterns, schemata learned by observation, or symbolically structured thinking (Bartsch and Hübner 2004: 106–10; Eder and Keil 2005a). They are therefore biocultural phenomena: they are based in part on innate biological or physical tendencies, but their specific manifestations and more complex forms are socially and individually shaped, for example through the acquisition of social rules, e.g., for feeling and expressing grief or desire. More specifically, the initial, usually preconscious stimulus perception is often (but not always) followed by further, more complex cognitive processes, such as language comprehension, imaginations, memories, fantasies, conclusions, evaluations, plans, or attempts at interpretation and control of the affective process itself, which may be reflected upon and conceptually categorised. All such cognitive processes can flow into affects, shape them, and focus attention on future relevant cues.

Affects are therefore by no means separate from cognitions, but are closely connected to them, forming their ‘felt side’. They are multi-layered psychophysical processes in which stimulus perceptions and body reactions combine with cognitions and behavioural tendencies of a partly expressive nature. The connection of all these processes is subjectively experienced as a whole: as a *feeling* with a certain intensity and valence. Affects ‘feel a certain way’, their triggers or objects gain a certain valence for the person experiencing them, are perceived as good or bad, positive or negative, pleasant or unpleasant.⁶

Affective processes change, unfold, and pass over time. They often develop into complex episodes over several stages of interconnected associations, thoughts, or attempts at control. In the meantime, new stimuli and reactions can occur, resulting in overlapping or mixed feelings. Perhaps I hear the melody of ‘As Time Goes By’

6 Cf. Mulligan 1997: 2ff.; Carroll 1999: 21; on ‘quality of experience’: Husserl 1993: Vol. II/1. Reducing emotions to tendencies of action or physiological processes associated with them ignores their experiential quality. Some psychological definitions of emotion thus seem reductionist: ‘An emotion may be defined as a change in action readiness as a result of the subject’s appraisal of the situation or event’ (Tan 1996: 46). Such definitions leave out the experiential quality and seem too narrowly focused on emotions actually eliciting a specific kind of action readiness.

from the next room. The soft minor-key sound evokes a melancholy mood, my body relaxes, neuronal and hormonal activity changes (bodily reactions). I stop what I am doing, listen, my face becomes serious (behavioural tendencies). I concentrate on the song, recognise it, remember, and associate it with a loved one and their loss (other cognitions). This transforms my melancholy into pain, offence, anger, and I storm into the next room to turn off the song (further development of the emotional episode). Such affective *processes* should be distinguished from affective *dispositions* as more permanent tendencies to react to certain stimuli, such as sympathy, antipathy or empathy with characters. For example, sympathy makes us take sides with a character and respond with various related affects in different situations, fearing, hoping or rejoicing. Characters can thus elicit not only conscious, object-directed emotions, but also preconscious sensations and moods, which may be associatively 'attached' to them, for example by musical leitmotifs. In addition to situational affects, the viewers' involvement with characters also includes more permanent dispositions (such as sympathy, antipathy, or readiness to empathise) as well as temporal affects (such as wishes, hopes, and fears directed towards the characters' future and past).

The proposed concept of affect/emotion has further consequences for the conception of affective reactions to films in general and characters in particular. Films can be seen as 'emotion machines' (Tan 1996), or affective stimulus systems; they offer dense bundles of stimuli that guide affective episodes in an altogether planful manner. Affective reactions when watching a film can be divided into four levels (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 4): (1) On the perceptual level, the images and sounds of the film trigger spontaneous bodily affects and moods. (2) The perceptual impressions are processed into mental models, vivid ideas of a world with characters and events that evoke a broad spectrum of character and situation-related emotions. (3) From the represented world, viewers infer general themes and indirect meanings that can be affectively related to their own lives. (4) And finally, viewers subject the communication process, its perceived causes and effects, to reflection accompanied by aesthetic, moral, and self-referential emotions. These levels with their different affective stimuli are interrelated and influence each other. For example, according to Smith (2003), moods can be created subliminally by music, acoustic shocks, or visual impressions and form a permanent background for short-term emotions. The spectators' perception of the depicted world is thus affectively coloured through moods. They create a predisposition for intense emotions and pave the way for them. When in a sad mood, I am more likely to feel sad about a fatal event.⁷ Vice versa, more intense emotional impulses are needed from time to time to maintain a certain mood.

How affective processes arise is modelled very differently in various research approaches in philosophy, psychology, and other scientific disciplines (Moors 2009), and this in turn shapes various perspectives in film and media studies. Some theorists assume that *basic emotions* such as joy, fear, or sadness arise when specific stimuli

7 However, there is also the phenomenon of contrasts: a joyful or sad event has even stronger effects if the viewer had previously been lulled into feeling 'safe' by the opposite mood.

activate universal 'affect programmes' that automatically and cross-culturally lead to typical bodily action and expressive tendencies. In the case of fear, for example, these are the release of stress hormones, a fearful face, and the impulse to run away. *Constructivist emotion theories* claim that stimulus perceptions initially lead to unspecific core affects, states of neuronal and physical arousal. Conscious emotions are then 'constructed' from these by interpreting the situation with the help of sociocultural emotion concepts (e.g., of love). Some approaches in *neuroscience* distinguish between two ways of affective stimulus evaluation: automatic reactions in developmentally old brain regions can be supplemented and influenced by conscious thought processes in the cerebrum. Psychological *appraisal theories*, in turn, assume that emotion processes proceed from preconscious or conscious stimulus evaluations according to certain criteria: is something new or familiar, pleasant or unpleasant, does it correspond to goals and values? This appraisal then evokes bodily reactions, expressive and action tendencies as components. *Phenomenological theories* again focus on how affective processes are subjectively experienced and described as 'feelings'.

The proposed general concept of affective processes and the more specific theories of their emergence have far-reaching consequences for the understanding of affective reactions to films in general and characters in particular. Most studies of affect/emotion in film are based on deductive theories and assume hypothetical model viewers. For this reason, empirical researchers often criticise that they neglect the diversity of actual audience reactions. On the other hand, empirical methods, such as surveys or brain scans, provide at best indirect evidence with limited explanatory power, and film theories offer something that empirical audience research lacks: a detailed conceptualisation of cinematic forms and cues. Films can be conceived of as 'emotion machines' (Tan 1996), as 'invitations to feel' with specific mood cues (Smith 2003), or as affective stimulus systems; they offer dense bundles of stimuli that guide affective episodes in an altogether planful manner.

However, different theoretical foundations suggest that different film structures (and corresponding audience dispositions) are particularly important for the development of affective phenomena: those that evoke non-specific core affects (affect studies); activate innate affect programmes (evolutionary psychology); lead to introspectively graspable feelings and sensations (phenomenology); or are related to viewers' situational appraisals and concerns (cognitive psychology). Furthermore, theories of affective appraisal can take opposite directions: where analytic philosophy emphasises conscious moral evaluations, psychoanalysis instead stresses unconscious amoral desires and drive conflicts. Equally controversial is the question of the extent to which affective processes are shaped by nature, culture, society, social groups, family, personality traits, life phases or reception situations. Even theories that emphasise the importance of sociocultural factors disagree about which of them are most important: early childhood relationships, habitualised schemata, moral norms, social identities, or group-specific experiences.

Based on such heterogeneous basic theories—in particular psychoanalysis, phenomenology, cognitive science, and affect studies—four leading approaches to affect elicitation compete in film and media theory. In the 1970s and 1980s, *psychoanalytical film theories* dominated the field. They assume a conflictual structure of the spectator psyche, predominantly determined by the unconscious (id and superego), and focus on a limited spectrum of affective phenomena, especially drives, desires, pleasures, fears, and processes of identification, transference, or repression. Laura Mulvey (1989), for example, argues that Hollywood cinema's portrayal of men and women intends to evoke male viewers' desire, castration anxiety, and narcissistic and fetishist pleasures, while denying women identification with active characters and relegating them to a passive object position. Other theories include further forms of identification with characters or object relationships to them, such as vicarious wish fulfilment or Oedipal affects (e.g., Cowie 1997; see Chapter 13). The psychoanalytic paradigm was taken up by feminist and cultural studies and expanded to include concepts of group-specific affects related to social power (e.g., Fiske 1987; Koch 1995).

Around 1990, the phenomenological and the cognitive paradigms emerged. *Phenomenological* theories strive for introspective, dense descriptions of the affective film experience in its temporality, emphasising bodily sensations and experiences (Sobchack 1992). According to them, cinematic forms activate not only the senses of sight and hearing, but synaesthetically other sensory modalities such as haptics (Marks 2002). The phenomenological paradigm has always been in exchange with other lines of theory, dealing, for instance, with the 'body genres' of horror, melodrama, and porn (Williams 1991).

Since the late 1990s, the *cognitive* paradigm has provided the most publications. It is closely linked to empirical emotion research in the sciences. At the same time, it is the subject of fierce criticism and numerous misunderstandings, because the term 'cognitive' suggests a reduction to conscious thought. In fact, however, 'cognitive' only refers to cognitive science as a theoretical foundation, which also investigates pre-conscious sensory and bodily processes and is heterogeneous in itself. For example, some cognitive film theories draw on philosophy of mind to differentiate between types of affects, examine their connections with narrative (Carroll 1999, Plantinga 2009), or analyse character engagement (Smith 1995). Others are more oriented towards psychological appraisal theories, which trace emotions back to complex processes of situated stimulus evaluation. According to Ed Tan (1996), for example, film viewers develop both 'fiction emotions' such as sympathy or suspense, based on the observation of characters and their situations, and 'artefact emotions', based on the perception of aesthetic forms. A third type of cognitive film theory emphasises the role of neuronal structures, such as so-called mirror neurons, which enable viewers to share behavioural affects of observed characters (Gallese and Guerra 2012). Torben Grodal (2009) assumes that characters and situations trigger evolutionarily based affective tendencies in the brain; for example, the sadness in loss scenes is based on evolutionary

attachment emotions. In contrast, Smith (2003) emphasises the individual shaping of the brain through experiences that are associatively reactivated by different film cues, so that narrative structures interact with audiovisual forms that induce certain moods. While for a long time narrative structures and conscious emotions were the main focus of cognitive approaches (Plantinga and Smith 1999), they have now opened up to other paradigms (Shimamura 2013), present integrative overall designs (Plantinga 2009) as well as more differentiated models of narrative emotions (Hogan 2011), and also turn to 'non-cognitive affects' (Coplan and Matravers 2011), audiovisual metaphors (Fahlenbrach 2010), ethical questions (Wulff 2005; Stadler 2008; Plantinga 2018a), or sociocultural contexts and political emotions (Eder 2018).

The latter topics also form a focus of the fourth paradigm on media and affect, which emerged in the 2010s inspired by Gilles Deleuze's philosophy. These so-called Affect Studies focus on preconscious affects, which they strictly separate from conscious emotions (Massumi 1995). Again, 'affect' is defined in very different ways. Some subsume under it—with Deleuze—any form of physical affectation between material objects: accordingly, affects would be relational, pre-personal impulses that bring about changes in and between bodies. Others, however, understand affects—with constructivist theories of emotion—as bodily-neuronal precursors of conscious emotions that are not yet cognitively classified. What such positions have in common is the emphasis on relational, bodily processes, often combined with the view that affects—in contrast to socially shaped emotions—bring with them particular potentials for social change (cf. Angerer, Bösel, and Ott 2014). Affect studies and the phenomenological paradigm both focus on the temporal unfolding of the film as an impulse generator of bodily affectivity and criticise cognitive theories for overestimating conscious emotions and narrative structures, including characters. However, they cannot avoid recourse to such 'representational' film elements themselves, which can be observed in all their works.

Theories of film and affect also differ in the extent to which they take into account differences between everyday and medium-specific affects. These include, firstly, the preconditions of the media dispositif (the structures and affordances of the medium): spectators' affects develop within the 'affective niche' of a medium such as cinema or television (Hven 2019), and usually in freely chosen safe situations that enable specific types of affects and are associated with different motives for reception, such as seeking entertainment or information (Suckfüll 2013). The fact that the viewers are exempt from acting can lead to them feeling relaxed because they know they are safe, but also tense because they cannot intervene. If reception takes place jointly, for example in a cinema, processes of collective emotionality can develop (Hanich 2018). The film experience is also accompanied by the awareness that films are communicative artefacts and serve to convey meaning. Film viewers therefore search for meanings and reflect on the fact that filmmakers address their audience with certain intentions. Often, there is also an awareness of fictionality, and the film experience is influenced by media-specific

knowledge about genres, stars or narrative conventions. Newer theories explain the so-called 'paradox of fiction' (the fact that media users develop emotions even though what they observe is only invented) through preconscious stimulus reactions and multi-layered imaginative processes, which may create the impression of being 'immersed' in the depicted world as an observer or participant, often concerning situations of observed others, as in the co-experience of a character's plight.

The most obvious difference between watching films and experiencing everyday situations is that films guide affects through narrative, audiovisual or other means. The cinematic focus on certain affective cues—for example the close-up of a crying face—invites the viewers to develop affects of a certain type, intensity, valence, and duration. When viewers grasp what is depicted, this always happens from a certain perspective. The audiovisual form and the sensual perception of images and sounds, shapes, colours, textures, and movements convey such perspectives and lend certain atmospheres to the worlds depicted (Sinnerbrink 2012). In addition, images and sounds can already express and evoke sensations and moods independently of what is presented (Smith 2003), such as induced tension in dynamic images or sensory imaginations of texture or temperature (Antunes 2016). The influence of music on affect forms a separate field of research (Sena Moore 2017).

But viewers not only react affectively to the film world and style; they also derive second-order meanings from both. They search for meaning in symbols and metaphors, relate themes to their own values, and experience intellectual pleasure by recognising subtle allusions. In addition, viewers reflect on their own situation in the context of film communication, as well as on its elements, causes and effects, for example about the film as a work of art, the filmmakers, other viewers, or their own responses. They may, for example, feel repulsed by racist tendencies, develop 'artefact emotions' concerning film aesthetics (Tan 1996) or feel 'meta-emotions' about their own feelings (Bartsch 2008), such as shame about their conspicuous fear in a horror film or pride about being empathetic. Many theoretical approaches neglect some of these media-specific parameters of affect development.

As theories of film/media and affect/emotion are based on heterogeneous concepts and correspondingly different data and methods, they also disagree on several fundamental questions: To what extent are audience experiences dominated by conscious emotions, diffuse moods, bodily affects, or other affective phenomena? Which conditions are decisive for affective reactions—nature, culture, society, groups, individual personality, or current situations? Which kinds of experiences and dispositions have the strongest influence on viewers' responses—childhood relationships, cultural values and norms, socially formed schemata, group-specific experiences, or personal identities? To what extent do viewers' affects differ from one another, are they subjective or do they have an intersubjective core? And how do specific affect structures of the film and its characters interact with this basis of affective audience dispositions?

Despite (or because of) the enormous number of publications, these questions remain open or controversial. This is also because the theories have different aims and functions, without always being aware of it: some of them aim to explain current or past audience reactions, others try to predict future reactions or determine the potential impact of films, still others want to improve creative practices, recommend appropriate emotions, or criticise sociocultural affect structures. For these reasons, they often focus on very different affective phenomena. The above questions cannot be answered in general, but depend on the relevant contexts, audiences, films, and characters. An exchange between the theories and an integrative mapping of their compatible results would therefore be desirable.

In Chapters 3 and 5, I had already outlined a proposal for an such integrative conceptualisation of character and film reception, which can here serve as a basis to map viewers' affective experiences, their cinematic cues, and their interplay. According to this, specific kinds of affective reactions develop across four levels when watching a film, and many theories of cinematic affect focus on one or two of these levels, or on specific types of affects and cinematic cues: (1) On the perceptual level, the images and sounds of the film trigger spontaneous bodily affects and moods. (2) The perceptual impressions are processed into mental models, vivid ideas of a world with characters and events that evoke a broad spectrum of character and situation-related emotions. (3) From the represented world, viewers infer general themes and indirect meanings that can be affectively related to their own lives. (4) And finally, viewers subject the communication process, its perceived causes and effects, to reflection accompanied by aesthetic, moral, and self-referential emotions. These levels with their different affective stimuli and responses are interrelated and influence each other.⁸

On all four levels, involvement with (representations of) characters is at the core of some of the most intense and important affective responses to films and other media. Character involvement forms a basis for affective reactions to the narrative plot and its temporal development. Depending on whether present or anticipated events correspond to viewers' concerns for particular characters, their sympathetic or antipathetic attitudes towards them, and their taking sides for or against them, viewers respond to the development of the plot with certain affects, such as situational feelings of joy or fear, or narrative emotions of suspense, surprise, and curiosity (Tan 1996: 206ff).

8 In other publications, I have described cinematic affect structures, the types of cinematic affects and their interplay in more detail (e.g., Eder 2016b, 2018). They resonate with other's work. For example, I would agree with Smith's claim (2003) that moods can be created subliminally by music, sound, or images and form a permanent background for short-term emotions on the level of mental models and storyworlds. The spectators' perception of the storyworld is thus affectively coloured through moods. They create a predisposition for intense emotions and pave the way for them. When in a sad mood, I am more likely to feel sad about a fatal event. (However, there is also the phenomenon of contrasts: a joyful or sad event has even stronger effects if the viewer had previously been lulled into feeling 'safe' by the opposite mood.) Vice versa, more intense emotional impulses are needed from time to time to maintain a certain mood.

14.2 Cues, Dispositions, and Forms of Involvement with Characters

What do the above general explanations mean for understanding the audience's affective involvement with characters as a whole? In what different ways can viewers react affectively to a character? The common basic assumption of many theories is that we react to characters somehow 'parasocially', i.e., largely as we do to real people we encounter in everyday life. It should be clear by now that I do not share this assumption. Although I don't want to deny the important similarities between affective reactions to characters and to real people, there are also immense differences that we should be aware of.

To start with, as characters are communicative constructs on a meta-level, viewers do not react directly to them (see Chapter 3, Chapter 4, and Chapter 5). Rather, they react to perceived *representations* of characters and to their own subjective *ideas* about them. Firstly, we perceive images or sounds that represent characters. This sensory perception can already trigger spontaneous affects, but above all it serves as a starting point for the development of mental character models and associated affects. More precisely, five general kinds of affective reactions to characters can be distinguished, which were already introduced previously: (1) Viewers react to character representations, i.e., to images, sounds and other external stimuli that contribute to the development of a character model. (2) They react to the mental model itself, i.e., their idea of a depicted being, as an internal stimulus. And they react to more complex cognitions, including (3) inferences about higher meanings of the character, (4) reflections on perceived communicative causes and effects of the character and (5) aesthetic judgements of the character as a filmic artefact. In short, our affective involvement can be related to the character as artefact, represented being, symbol, and symptom. A character can evoke sympathy, antipathy, or empathy as a represented being, sensory affects and aesthetic judgements as an artefact, affective connections to one's own experiences as a conveyor of themes, and emotional assessments of its perceived causes or effects as a symptom (see Diagram 31, a variant of Diagram 6 in Chapter 4).

Affective reactions to a character arise from the interplay of certain cues in these four areas with certain viewer dispositions. So, what cues do we react to? Most theories focus on the character as a represented being. Here, basically any features and situations of storyworld beings can be perceived and evaluated as affective cues, including a character's physicality (appearance, bodily expression, voice, language, and physical position in an environment), sociality (social actions, relationships, roles, groups, status, and power), psychology (permanent personality traits and transient experiences, feelings, motives, values, problems), as well as the character's situations and behaviours. As we have seen in Chapters 3 to 6, the character model as the system of these perceived properties and cues is gradually emerging and constantly changing during film reception.

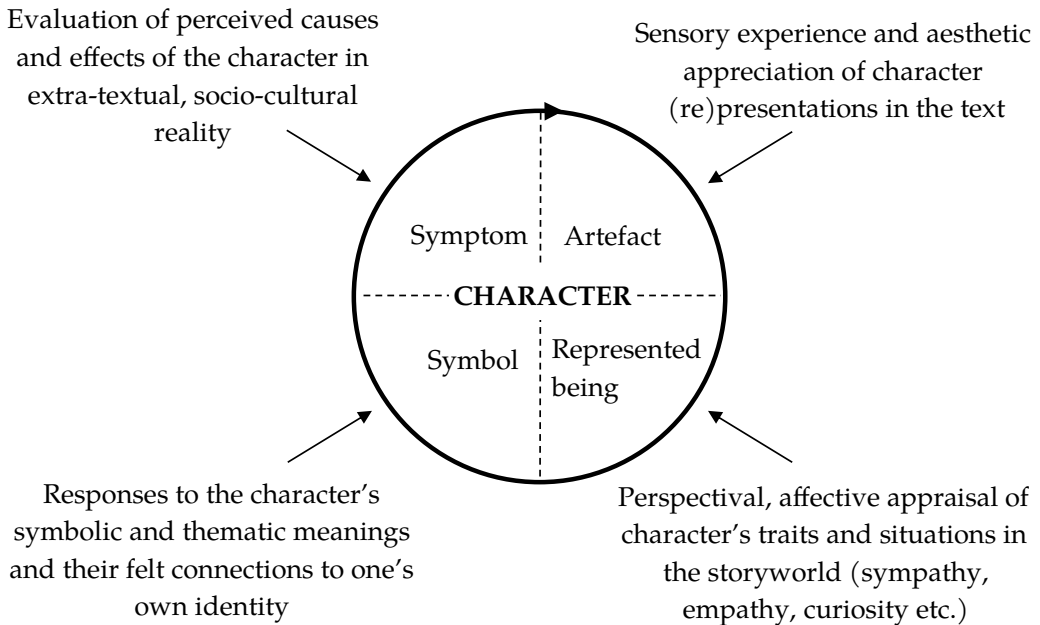


Diagram 31 Affective reactions to characters as represented beings, symbols, symptoms, and artefacts

The formation of the character model is based on the sensual-affective experience of moving images and sounds that represent the character. The affective cues of the character as artefact include the shapes, colours, textures, and movements of the images of the character's body, as well as the sounds and music associated with the character. All these sensory cues can evoke spontaneous bodily affects and subliminal moods. On the higher level of aesthetic reflection and appreciation, more conscious emotions come into play, some of which require complex media knowledge: for example, admiration of the acting performance, the camera work, or the narrative artistry.

The affective cues of the character as a symbol include the (sad, hopeful, threatening, or provocative) themes and statements associated with it, understood on the basis of sociocultural knowledge. In some cases, as we have seen, the whole character may be seen as a personification or allegory of emotionally charged experiences such as death, loss, or love.

As symptoms, finally, characters often involve indicators of their possible causes, effects, or contexts in reality. These are interwoven with political positions, social conflicts, ideologies, identities and corresponding affect structures, and thus can become strong cues for moral or political emotions. For example, the character can be perceived as an instrument of propaganda, consumption, enlightenment, or moral education. The viewers may form the idea that the filmmakers had certain good or bad intentions when creating the character, or that the character will have positive or negative effects as a role model for a target audience. Such ideas may trigger decisive judgements and intense affective responses.

All these kinds of cues interact with an equally large and diverse spectrum of physical, cognitive, and affective dispositions of the viewers. These dispositions have a decisive influence on how the mental image of a depicted being and its characteristics develops in the character synthesis, whether this image evokes affects and what these are. As we have seen, the most significant difference between the current theories of affective engagement with media is that they focus on different affective dispositions of the audience because they draw on different more fundamental theories of affect.⁹

Evolutionary psychology emphasises the importance of universal human abilities, such as innate affect programs. The neurosciences focus on neuronal and hormonal structures as the physical basis of emotions, such as emotional centres or mirror neurons in the brain. Neo-phenomenologists also emphasise bodily experience, but describe it more from an inner perspective. Cognitive psychology emphasises subjective goals that lead to situation-specific appraisals, as well as emotional memory, such as associative schemes and scripts. According to some analytical philosophers, emotions are predominantly based on (moral) value judgements. The various forms of psychoanalysis start from early childhood relationships and experiences as well as ego ideals and narcissistic and libidinal desires, which are unconsciously transferred to the characters and shape identification with them. Social psychology, on the other hand, emphasises intersubjective social roles and group interests, and history and cultural studies emphasise the influence of cultures on emotions.

These focal points have important consequences for analysis. They determine how one sees the extent to which affective reactions to characters are shaped by nature, culture, group interests, or individual experience; the degree of intersubjectivity they possess; the sociocultural influences they depend on; how they are associated with cognitive and physical processes; whether they occur unconsciously or are experienced consciously; and finally, what types of affective involvement are to be taken into account in the analysis. An interdisciplinary discussion among these positions has barely begun, but there are good reasons to think that they are not fundamentally incompatible and that many of their findings can be combined.¹⁰ Accordingly, which character cues trigger which affects depends on biological foundations as well as on sociocultural imprints, group memberships, individual memories, and situational dispositions of the audience. Viewers' feelings for a character may be based on innate tendencies, oriented towards social norms, and vary according to individual experiences and current conditions.

9 Some examples of work in these areas: evolutionary psychology: Schwab and Schwender 2007; neuroscience: Smith 2003; Eder and Keil 2005a; cognitive psychology: Tan 1996; Grodal 1999; Hogan 2003a; analytical philosophy: Carroll 1999; Smith 1995; neo-phenomenology: Sobchack 1992; psychoanalysis: Cowie 1997; Aumont, Bergala, and Marie 1992; Friedberg 1990; social psychology: Fiske 1997. Semiotic and hermeneutic approaches do not play an important role, since they are more concerned with understanding, but there are some (cf. Jauß 1972; 1984). The theories are more or less exact in their discussion of forms and causes of involvement, but simplicity or complexity are not relevant criteria in themselves; coherence, convincing explanations, and operationalism are crucial.

10 Cf. Eder 2003; Bartsch and Hübner 2004.

In short: a variety of potential affective character cues meet an equally wide variety of affective dispositions and reaction tendencies on the part of the audience: evolutionary patterns, emotional memories, moral, and aesthetic values, cultural rules of emotion, wishful projections, and other factors work together. When the 'right' cues meet the 'right' dispositions, various affective impulses and processes of character involvement arise (Table 11).

Character cues...	...interact with...	...viewer dispositions
Represented being: • Physicality • Psyche • Sociality • Behaviour and situation Artefact: • Images, sounds, rhythms • Consciously perceived design of the character (acting style etc.) • Structure of the character model (degree of typification, realism, consistency etc.) Symbol: • Inference of higher meanings, themes Symptom: • Indicators of communicative causes and effects	Interaction of character cues and viewers dispositions results in various kinds of affective processes, from mere curiosity and bodily affects to sympathy and empathy to reflective, thematic, aesthetic and sociocultural emotions	• Attention, innate reactions based on bodily structures • Basic ability to empathise • Learned affective schemata • Influences of early childhood • (Repressed) desires, experiences of lack • Emotional memory • Internalised cultural values and norms (also concerning emotions), ego ideal • Interests shaped by personal, group, or role identity (class, race, gender, age, religion etc.) • Media knowledge • Situational preferences (relaxation, sensation seeking etc.)

Table 11 Cinematic cues and mental prerequisites for affective involvement

So far, there are no convincing arguments that would exclude certain of these many factors from the outset. General empirical evidence indicates that in mainstream films—statistically speaking—the evaluation of characters according to morality and aesthetics/attractiveness seems to be particularly important (Konijn and van Hoorn 2003; Zillmann 2005). However, there is still no comprehensive theory about which cues of which characters or character types (also beyond the mainstream) trigger which kinds of affective responses in different groups of viewers, and empirical

indicators for individual films often point in divergent directions. For example, Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* is a handsome, hedonistic, and sadistic teenager whose main interests, according to the film poster, are rape, ultra-violence, and Beethoven. In several ways, the film creates a special combination of artificiality and strong imaginative proximity to Alex (Eder 2007a), and Stanley Kubrick has summarised his intention as wanting to create a conflict in the audience between moral condemnation and pleasurable identification with a sadist in order to stimulate reflection on human nature. Many viewers do indeed seem to react with emotional conflicts, albeit often in different, not necessarily intended forms. It is easy to imagine, and can be read in many commentaries, that teenage gang members and ageing intellectuals, feminists and street workers or Kubrick admirers and detractors react to Alex with different feelings. This example shows how different audience dispositions can shape the involvement with one and the same character and lead to very different reactions.

14.3 Perspectival Appraisal and Involvement with Represented Beings

The following sections will now focus on the affective involvement with characters as represented beings, based on the character model as a mental representation of a person (or animal, alien, robot) with certain traits, relationships, and behaviours in the storyworld. As we have seen, this involvement with depicted beings is only one part of the affective reactions to characters, as we also react to them as artefacts, symbols, and symptoms. Moreover, the reactions to characters in all their aspects form only one part of the diverse affective reactions to the film as a whole (Diagram 32). Of course, responses to the film are again shaped by the specific situation of watching it, and this again by certain larger medial and sociocultural environments. We should thus keep in mind that affective responses to represented beings are influenced by all of these contexts, as the film constantly provides new affective cues, the viewers' dynamic cognitive and affective processes interact, and the physiological arousal of one affect (say, an acoustic shock, or anger about a character's political meaning) can flow into subsequent, different ones (say, antipathic responses to the character as a represented being).

Moreover, it must be remembered that we react differently to represented beings than to real people for several reasons (see Chapter 5, Chapter 7, and Chapter 8). Our involvement is influenced by the situation in which the film is being received and our awareness that it is fiction and a form of communication. We know that it is just a movie and that we are not involved in a direct, physical encounter with the character. We cannot shape what is happening, our individual interests are not directly affected by it, and we have neither the possibility nor the obligation to intervene. Affective reactions to characters are therefore mostly based on an observer's perspective. They are also less controlled and less inhibited than responses in direct encounters

with real others. Media, especially fictional, thus make it easier to live out tabooed, suppressed desires imaginarily, and the general tone of the story, for instance a comic or ironic level like in *Pulp Fiction*, influences audience responses. More particularly, the structure of the character model has effects on the viewers' attention, imagination, and affect. Characters tend to evoke more intense affects when the model is experienced as personalised, realistic, detailed, multidimensional, coherent, consistent, and vivid—in short: when it captivates attention and is an effective illusion. In contrast, if the model is perceived as typical or artificial, the character's quality as an artefact can attract attention to itself and lead to—often negative—emotions, for example if the clumsy artificiality of character representations annoys viewers.

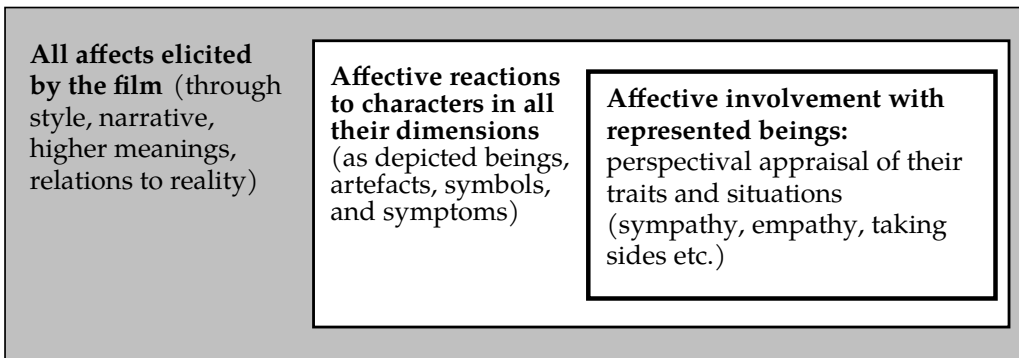


Diagram 32 Nested affective reactions to characters as represented beings, to characters in all their four dimensions, and to entire films or media texts

Despite all these qualifications, in most films represented beings form a crucial part or even the core of viewers' affective experiences, and accordingly, they are also the focus in most theories on character and emotion. Therefore, the following considerations concentrate on this aspect and its more specific questions: what are the main affective cues of depicted beings—their physical appearance and expressive behaviour, their mental traits, motives and personality, their social relationships, or the events and experiences they are involved in? What is the relation between the viewers' own affects and the characters' feelings; do viewers and characters feel something similar or different? Do viewers react to characters primarily with moral feelings in accordance with social norms or rather amorally, for example in the form of erotic desire, voyeurism or the vicarious satisfaction of repressed wishes? Do viewers react more selfishly by viewing characters as objects, or more altruistically by taking their side and empathising with them? And to what extent do the audience's emotions focus on individual protagonists or spread more broadly across the entire character constellation?

As outlined above, the existing theories answer such questions quite differently: some approaches stress that viewers share the situational affects of protagonists through identification, empathy, or simulation (e.g., Cowie 1997; Brinckmann 1999;

Grodal 2009; Gallese and Guerra 2012; Hagener and Vendrell 2017). Others emphasise that viewers evaluate characters morally from an observer's perspective (e.g., Carroll 1999; Zillmann 2005). And a third group of theories suggests that reactions to characters are primarily determined by non-moral desires or fears (e.g., Mulvey 1989). These approaches lead to widely diverging assumptions about how and why viewers react to a particular character, such as a murderous femme or homme fatale: if the first approach were correct, viewers would lustfully co-experience the character's sadism; according to the second approach, they would morally abhor the character; and according to the third approach, they would desire them erotically. In fact, however, all three types of reactions are possible and can be found in different films, sequences, or audiences. Therefore, some more recent theories assume that viewers' reactions to represented persons move on a wide spectrum that includes all three kinds of responses: guided by the film's perspective, narration and style, they move between the poles of identification and evaluation, of feeling *with* characters and *for* them, of moral and non-moral appraisal.

Which affective responses from this spectrum become dominant will differ not only from character to character, but also in different phases of the film, as character models, cues, and contexts change over the course of reception. Nevertheless, there are some plausible assumptions about key affective cues. Many scholars consider the moral assessment of a character's personality and behaviour to be central (e.g., Smith 1995; Zillmann 2005; Wulff 2005). Scriptwriting guides also emphasise the importance of socio-moral 'giving and taking' of help and care (Zag 2005), or of 'acting under pressure', from which the true values and moral principles of a character can be read (McKee 1997). In the history of the humanities, morality, beauty, and eros are considered classic themes, but also power, status, conflict, death, or social ostracism (see Chapter 11). Critical cultural studies point out how much such themes and cues are themselves shaped by social structures and group affinities.

More generally, it can be assumed that all those traits and behaviours are strong elicitors of viewer affects that are also relevant to the social lives of real people because they are associated with widespread values and concerns or deviate from prevailing norms and notions of normality (see Chapter 6). These effective cues include physical characteristics such as beauty, cuteness, illness, or abilities such as strength or dexterity; psychological characteristics such as motivation, emotion, identity, intelligence, empathy, and other mental abilities, neurodiversity or psychopathologies; social characteristics such as roles, status, power, values, as well as group interests, oppositions, and the association with in-groups or out-groups according to nationality, religion, age, gender, ethnicity or political position; and in the area of behaviour, above all problem-solving, conflicts, as well as pro- and antisocial actions ('sex and crime'). Since most films deal with social interaction and this presupposes that the audience understands the characters' motives, their inner life and social behaviour are particularly relevant. Similar to event-focused emotions, character-focused affects may

also be based on a desire for situational control or knowledge (Wuss 2009), a general curiosity or interest (Tan 1996), a sense of wonder, or a fascination with spectacle or the sublime.

There is thus a plausible set of affective character cues that seem to be particularly relevant in general, but to answer the question of the affective impact of depicted beings and their features more systematically, we need to consider the relationship between film structures and audience dispositions, keeping in mind that we are not talking about fixed rules, but only about probabilities. Concerning the film and its character representations, we can start with the basic fact that affect requires attention. Therefore, the likelihood of character traits triggering affective reactions increases if they are presented in a conspicuous way, repeatedly, or over a longer period of time and thus assume a central position within the film and the viewers' character model. With regard to the style or form of audiovisual character representations, all the elements of film style listed in Chapter 7, such as acting, *mise-en-scene*, camera work, colour, sound design, music, or dialogue, can be used to focus on certain affective cues. For example, if the camera moves towards a protagonist's face and shows it in close-up for several seconds, the emotional expression is usually more intense than in a shorter and more distant shot (Plantinga 1999). Acting can also express a character's emotions with more or less intensity, whereby overacting is usually perceived as unrealistic. Actors' star images also influence viewer reactions. Characters are perceived as more likeable when they are embodied by charismatic stars whose previous roles make them appealing. Moreover, stylistic elements (noises, picture compositions) can positively or negatively bias our view of the character by associating their appearance with pleasant or unpleasant sensations and thus subliminal attractions or aversions.

The narrative structure of the film also guides character involvement. Giving a character positive or negative traits already aims at certain affective reactions. The positioning of characters in relation to others in a constellation influences the way they are experienced, e.g., through comparison and contrast, relationships, conflicts or the mere presence of alternative values and characteristics in the storyworld. Guiding the audience's perspective and creating imaginative closeness and distance to the characters are also crucial (see Chapter 13). A fundamental question is also from whose perspective the story is told, to which character's external experience and inner life, presence and past, do we have the most comprehensive access to. Perceived physical proximity to a character can increase understanding, influence judgement, shift the understanding of which actions are perceived as acceptable and provide the viewer with a more nuanced perception of the motives for the character's behaviour and justifications for their mistakes. For example, prosocial or antisocial actions of a character can be depicted in drastic images and sounds, only mentioned in the dialogue, or merely implied. The order of narrative presentation also matters: traits shown at the beginning or end of a film are generally more memorable (primacy and recency effect, see Chapter 5). The attribution of motives, emotional situations, the

expression of intense feelings, scenes of empathy, and surrounding atmospheres and moods influence affective responses and dispositions.

All these cues conveyed by the film meet the affective dispositions of the viewers. Despite the differences to direct encounters with real persons, viewers' affective reactions to characters are also based on dispositions that shape affects towards people in everyday life (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 6). As we have seen, these dispositions and their connections to affective cues and processes are modelled differently by various theories that alternatively emphasise empathy, objective evaluation, subjective desires, situational partiality, or unconscious drives.¹¹ Elsewhere I have argued that none of these explanations are sufficient alone, and that they are not mutually exclusive but complementary (Eder 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2018). Rather than explaining affective responses to characters through only one form of involvement, it seems more sensible to integrate approaches, clarify their relationships, and expand their spectrum.

Therefore, the main thesis of this chapter is that viewers respond to characters based on a multilevel appraisal from a particular perspective that is guided by the film and shapes the mental character model. Appraisal is to be understood here in a broad sense; it does not only include cognitively higher-level value judgements, but also pre- or unconscious processes. In this respect, some cognitive and neuroscientific theories distinguish between two basic forms of affective processes, one direct and one indirect (cf. LeDoux 1996; Hogan 2003a: Chapter 7). In very simple stimulus reactions, such as being startled, the perception of affective stimuli is transmitted directly to the emotional centre of the brain (including the limbic system and the amygdala) and thus directly triggers affective arousal and bodily reactions. In other cases, the processing of affective stimuli takes a 'detour' via brain regions that are responsible for more complex, conscious cognitions (especially the prefrontal cortex), and then stimulates the emotional system (again). Accordingly, there are two basic forms of affective dispositions: some simple affects, such as the startle response, are based on innate, evolutionarily determined, preconscious tendencies that develop in almost all healthy adults. However, most affective processes are shaped by experiences that are stored in emotional memory and reactivated by similar stimuli—visual details, smells, sounds, words. These emotional memories are fundamentally individual in nature. However, as many individuals have similar experiences and are shaped by comparable social processes, such as socialisation in a culture or family, their memories and feelings coincide in many respects. Such collective and individual emotional memories are understood differently, e.g., as involving affective schemata, repressed desires, or emotional relationship patterns, and they give rise to a wide range of subsequent processes. This complexity corresponds to a group of psychological theories that distinguish not just two levels of affective appraisal but several further levels on a spectrum that ranges from automatic reactions to the activation of learnt

11 Cf. Smith 1995; Wulff 2003; Tan 1996; Grodal 1999; Zillmann 2005; Cowie 1997.

schemata to conscious, reflective judgement.¹² Such multilevel appraisal models make it possible to integrate different theoretical explanations for affective reactions, explain intersubjective correspondences of audience reactions, but at the same time leave the possibility open that reactions can take a subjective, associative, idiosyncratic course.

My own approach follows these psychological multilevel models of affective appraisal. In contrast to them, however, I would like to emphasise that multilevel appraisal always takes place from a certain perspective. As outlined in Chapter 13, by 'mental perspective' I mean the specific way in which someone experiences and represents an object of the world or storyworld (such as Rick in *Casablanca*) through processes of perceiving, thinking, evaluating, desiring, or feeling. As viewers, we always take a certain perspective on what we see, hear, or imagine to be in the film and its storyworld. Moreover, we can also attribute a perspective to characters, narrators, or filmmakers and compare their perspectives with each other and with our own. We therefore firstly have a (perceptual, cognitive, affective, evaluative, and motivational) perspective *on the character* and secondly a perspective *on their situation* that can resemble the character's perspective more or less, up to a partial perspective-taking and experiencing-with-the-character. Usually, the affects that are (intended to be) aroused in viewers are closely related to the depicted or imagined affects of the characters, but also more or less differ from them. For example, if the character is not aware an imminent danger, they can be happy while the viewer fears for them, as at the beginning of *Jaws*, or in many other thrillers and horror movies. Even if our feelings may be congruent with a character's grief or romantic desires and give rise to corresponding hopes and fears about future plot events, they are usually not identical—compassion for mourners is not the same as mourning, cringe is not the same as shame, and being moved is not the same as romantic longing.

Which perspective we take is guided by the film, which focuses attention on certain objects and aspects, marginalising others. The perspective on characters is also part of the complex system of imaginative relationships of spatial, temporal, and social closeness and distance (see Chapter 13). The experiential quality of our affective appraisal therefore depends not only on what is depicted, but also crucially on *how* it is depicted, how attention and experience are guided by a film's audiovisual form and narrative structure. This flexible shaping of character-related perspectives through film supports the assumption that there are correspondingly different forms of affective involvement with characters. Their relationship is summarised in Diagram 33. In reality, of course, the processes schematically differentiated here overlap and are dynamically interwoven, and they can be more or less conscious.

12 More detailed discussions of multilevel appraisal and the various neuronal or cognitive processes that shape affects and emotions can be found in van Reekum 2000: Chapter 1.4; Hogan 2003a, 2003b; Bartsch and Hübner 2004; Eder and Keil 2005a.

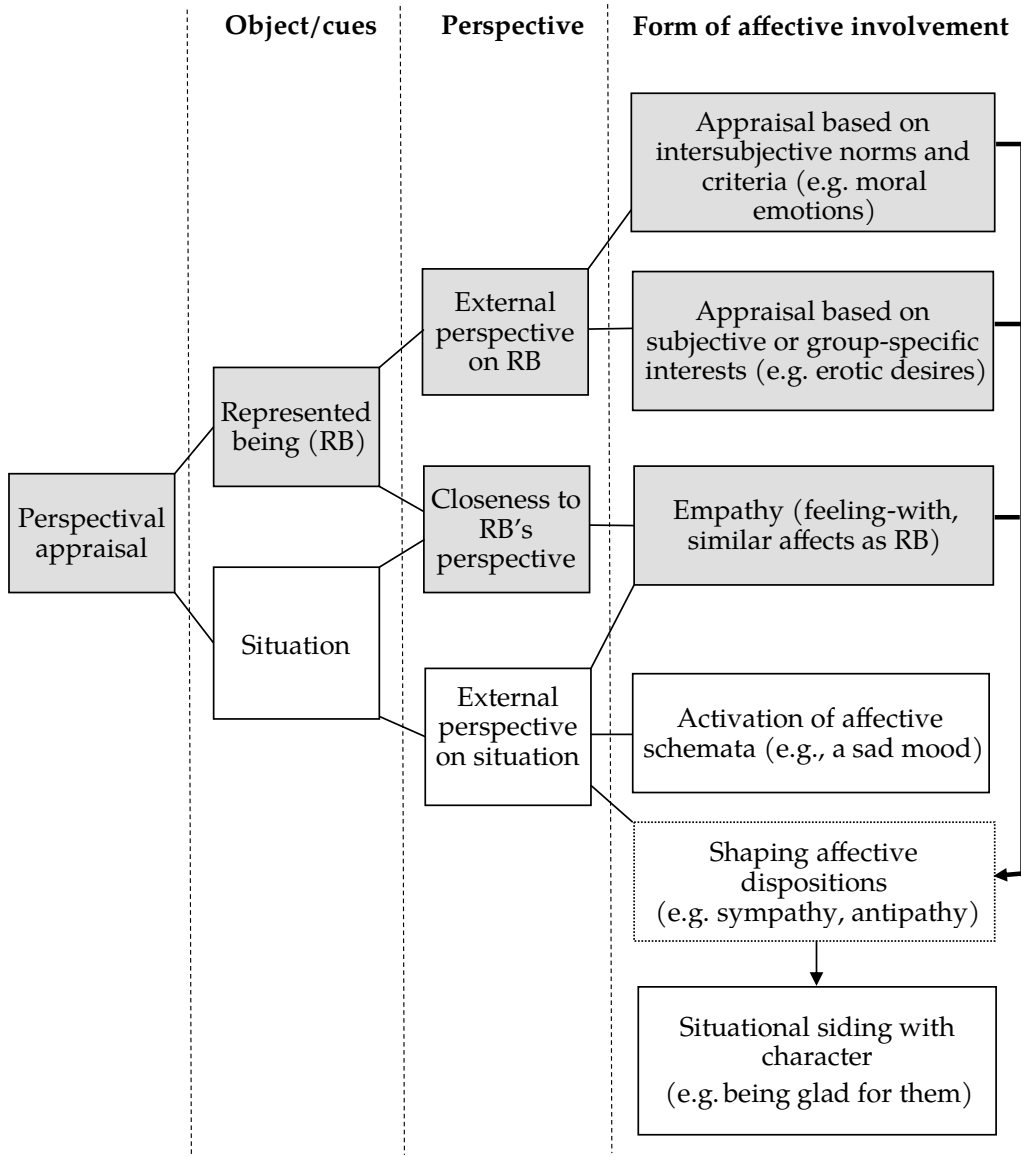


Diagram 33 Forms of affective involvement with characters and their situations in the storyworld

The basis for all other forms of involvement with depicted beings is the desire to learn something about them, i.e., *curiosity*, *interest*, *attention*, and associated experiences of recognising, discovering, and understanding. When we see a film sequence, our attention can be focused either on an individual character or on their situation. For example, at the first appearance of Rick in *Casablanca*, when he is playing chess with himself, we curiously concentrate on his appearance, actions, and personality traits. In the later sequence in which he meets Ilsa for the first time, on the other hand,

attention is divided among several characters, their interactions, and possible future developments. Both individual characters and their situations can be viewed from different perspectives—more ‘from outside’ or ‘from inside’.

Appraisal from an outside observer’s perspective can be more or less subjective or intersubjective. In *intersubjective* appraisal, characters, their qualities and their behaviour, such as Rick’s integrity or Ilsa’s beauty, are predominantly assessed according to moral, aesthetic and other values and norms that are generally accepted in a culture or even cross-culturally. Here, the most important affective cues are those character traits and behaviours that correspond to values, norms and ideals that are considered valid for all members of a society or even for all human beings.

In contrast, in *subjective* appraisals, characters are predominantly assessed according to more specific individual or group desires and interests, and on this basis tend to evoke idiosyncratic feelings such as erotic desire or political partisanship. This mainly involves dispositions, desires and biases that are specific to individual viewers or groups of viewers differing in terms of age, gender, race, sexual or political orientation, or other respects. For example, both male and female, heterosexual and homosexual viewers may perceive Rick’s development as morally positive or his appearance as conforming to cultural norms of male attractiveness, but at the same time project different erotic desires onto him, or may or may not choose him as a role model. Of course, such reactions can overlap and interact, mutually reinforcing each other or conflicting with each other.

While in both subjective and intersubjective external appraisals, the perspectives and affects of the audience differ significantly from those of the characters, this is not the case with *empathic* involvement, which requires a partial but essential approximation to the character’s affective perspective, a feeling-with the character and developing similar or congruent affects. Empathy can develop in different ways, for example through somatic contagion through the character’s affective expressions, through a shared focus on the same stimuli in a situation, through projection of sound or image induced moods onto the character or through active imagination or simulation, in which the viewers try to understand the character and put themselves in their position (Eder 2016b, 2017). Empathy therefore relates not only to the character or their situation, but to both at the same time. The major affective cues here are the character’s situational experience and expressive behaviour.

These three forms of perspective-dependent reactions—intersubjective, subjective, and empathic appraisal of characters and their situations—form the basis for the emergence of more permanent affective *dispositions* such as sympathy, antipathy, or empathy readiness in relation to a character.¹³ We may find a character likeable because we view them positively based on intersubjective values or our own interests and desires; which may be supported by empathy in certain situations.

13 Zillmann 2005, Tan 1996, Carroll 1999, and Smith 1995 point out the connection between moral appraisal and liking or disliking characters, but other, non-moral forms of appraisal will contribute to other affective dispositions, as well.

Our lasting positive or negative attitudes towards the character in turn form the basis for our *situational alliance or siding with* a character and our fleeting affects when we react to situations involving them. When we perceive such a situation, we often grasp its positive or negative consequences for the characters. If we like them, we take their side and react to the situation with positive or negative affects, depending on the impact it has on the character. We hope and fear for characters, cheer the victory, rescue, or happiness of heroes and the downfall of villains. Script guides differentiate here between outer goals (wants) and 'true needs' (see Chapter 10). In many melodramas, the hero falls for the dark-haired vamp, but the audience is supposed to already know that he and the gentle blonde are meant for each other, and to react negatively to everything that separates the two. Taking sides in a situation often requires weighing up alternatives: Is it better for Ilsa to follow her passion for Rick or her commitment to Laszlo?

A further form of involvement, closely related to empathy, is responding to a situation by activating *emotional memories or affective schemata* that have an indirect effect on our involvement with the characters. We then do not take sides in a conflict, but the specific and familiar type of situation or atmosphere evokes certain feelings in the viewers, which can then be projected onto the characters or strengthen empathy with them. Thus the parting of Ilsa and Rick could activate memories of one's own affective experiences or schemata of separation, and thus induce a diffuse sadness that is then associated with or attributed to the characters.

The involvement with represented beings therefore takes on different forms and perspectives. Intersubjective, subjective, and empathic appraisal form the basis for lasting dispositions of sympathy, antipathy, or empathy readiness and are most controversially discussed among theories. I will therefore now describe these three types of local reactions in more detail.

Appraisal According to Intersubjective Values

Viewers often assess characters, their traits and their actions like external observers according to intersubjective criteria. But what are these criteria, and in what sense can they be called intersubjective? Most theories here focus on moral norms and values that lead to moral emotions such as admiration, respect, appreciation, disapproval, indignation, outrage, or contempt.¹⁴ Murray Smith, for example, considers moral judgement to be the decisive factor in sympathy with characters. According to him, it is necessary to view a character as morally better than the others in order to develop sympathy for that character, to take sides with them and to react emotionally to their situations (Smith 1995: 188). However, we will see that morality is a complex concept, and that under certain circumstances other criteria can become more important than morality.¹⁵

14 In Smith 1995, Carroll 1999, Zillmann 2005, Wulff 2005, and Tan 1996, morality is presented as by far the most important or even the only truly relevant criterion for character appraisal.

15 There are many interesting recent publications on this topic, which could not be discussed here, e.g.,

Moral appraisal can focus on actions, traits, virtues, vices and attitudes, for example expressed in dialogues. Recurring behaviours, permanent personality traits, and fundamental motives seem to be more relevant than fleeting desires or spontaneous actions. Initial judgements are made quickly based on a few features, and these first impressions have a lasting effect (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 6). If moral cues are ambivalent, a character may be judged more cautiously. The gangster Silien in Melville's *Le doulos*, for example, seems to be a traitor, but is played by the charismatic actor Belmondo; it later transpires that he was wrongly suspected. If protagonists' moral qualities are represented clearly but contradictorily, this can make the characters seem inconsistent or the narrative unreliable.

Most approaches leave open what exactly is to be understood as 'moral'; a broadest possible understanding, for example as 'prosocial', seems useful. In this sense, Roland Zag's (2005) approach of 'giving and taking' provides a concrete rule of thumb: morally good characters give care, goods, or support to deserving others, while taking little for themselves (in relation to their abilities, needs and general principles of equality). If characters do not get what they deserve, it tends to cause feelings of injustice. More specific criteria of moral appraisal manifest themselves in cultural and cross-cultural norms and values, learned in socialisation and stored in emotional memory. Norms say what you should or should not do (including moral actions); values are collectively interiorised ideas of the good (including moral traits and motives). Of course, cultures and social groups differ in terms of the system and hierarchy of their moral norms and values, and their application is influenced by group-specific stereotypes and biases (see below). Nevertheless, there also seem to be far-reaching commonalities across cultures regarding fundamental norms and values, such as the prohibition of killing, the relationship between giving and taking, or Kant's categorical imperative not to treat other people merely as a means to an end. Basic moral values are anchored in constitutions and human rights declarations which may be disputed but are still accepted by far-reaching majorities in many societies, including most cinema audiences. In this sense, I assume that some essential norms and values apply intersubjectively within a society, but presumably even across societies.

Nevertheless, viewers often also develop a positive attitude towards characters that violate such norms and values and are morally neutral, ambivalent, or even clearly immoral, such as Rick Blaine at the beginning of *Casablanca*, the Mafiosi in *The Godfather*, Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, the *Natural Born Killers*, or *Bonnie and Clyde*. One reason for this is that moral appraisals are not rational, simple and schematic, but intuitive and subject to various circumstances and structural conditions (see also Smith 1995, 1999; Wulff 2005, Bruun Vaage 2015). Some of these conditions apply in a similar way in reality. Generally, people are not completely consistent in their moral values. Depending on the context, they can make different, even contradictory

judgements and behave in a more or less independent or adapted, dogmatic or critical way towards norm and value systems. Different moral values may also conflict with each other, so the character cannot do justice to them all at once. Many characters—like Ilsa caught between Rick and her husband—are in a moral dilemma that is not easy to resolve. Characters with human weaknesses are often more popular than saints or moralists, who seem contemptuous of life and hostile to pleasure, or present an ideal that the audience cannot live up to. Other ambivalent characters serve as helpers to a positive protagonist and do the moral dirty work on the way to a noble purpose that sanctifies these means. Some protagonists act badly but show moral potential or the will to improve. Their immoral behaviour may be no fault of their own, and they may themselves suffer from it (*Raging Bull*, *Naked*, *Bad Lieutenant*, *As Good as It Gets*). Viewers know that under the right conditions they could change and even become heroes (like Rick), whereas the sadistic villains in James Bond films do not suffer and are not open to improvement. Finally, characters may also violate moral norms that the viewers perceive as too rigid and restrictive, and from which they desire momentary liberation. Viewers may sympathise with such characters precisely because they break moral taboos and they would like to do the same, in these cases such vicarious amorality is facilitated by a fictional framing.

This already points to the fact that moral appraisal is not only complex and sometimes contradictory, but is also influenced by media-specific conditions: after all, it does not consist in an objective weighing of adequate information against norms and values, but is influenced by cinematic means of perspective, emphasis, and downplaying. Characters are measured not only by everyday standards, but also in relation to other characters in the constellation (e.g., Grizzard et al. 2021). Maybe the gangster protagonist, as an anti-hero, is brutal, but not as depraved as the corrupt, cruel policemen. Moreover, the rules of the storyworld—think of the absurd worlds in surrealism, the future worlds in sci-fi, the gangster worlds in film noir, the frontier worlds in the Western—often form a framework of values that differs from those of everyday life. Genre conventions define what is permissible and normal, set borders and positions of good and bad, and habitualise processes of moral appraisal and affective response. Violence is allowable, expected, and often approved in Westerns; cowboys solve their conflicts with fists and guns, not words (Wulff 2001b). Narrator commentary and the reactions of other characters, their praise and criticism, their admiration and mockery, also influence how we view characters' moral qualities, and the choice of time frame and film style affects this, too. For example, it makes a difference whether we directly see a character murder someone or just hear somebody speak about it. For the first half of *The Silence of the Lambs*, we do not see any of Hannibal Lecter's murders, while his help for Clarice Starling is emphasised. Similarly, the serial murderer in *Der Totmacher / The Deathmaker* is shown only as an accused prisoner, not as a cannibalistic killer; his deeds lie in the past.

The application of moral values and norms is not only influenced by practical and medial conditions, but it is also by no means the only basis for intersubjective appraisals of characters. Rather, *non-moral values* also play a crucial role, and they often conflict with morality. Their diverse spectrum includes physical, intellectual, affective, aesthetic, linguistic, and hedonistic values, including beauty, power, status, intelligence, humour, wit, education, elegance, eloquence, energy, intensity, performance, pleasure, agency, and self-determination.¹⁶ Spectators judge characters, for example, in terms of aesthetic or performance-related characteristics such as elegance or power and react with corresponding feelings such as admiration. In the case of mainstream characters, there are often typical linkages between certain moral and non-moral values, such as moral virtue and physical attractiveness: the beautiful, good princess and the ugly, wicked witch in the fairy tale or the idealised workers and repulsive capitalists in Eisenstein's films. This corresponds to the ancient Greek ideal of *kalokagathía*, of 'being beautiful and good at the same time'. Other stories reverse such combinations: the malformed Quasimodo has inner values; the femme fatale is beautiful but evil. However, the interplay of moral and non-moral values is usually more complex; they influence each other and must be weighed against each other. Positive properties can compensate for negative ones: it is easier to forgive humorous, sovereign, attractive characters for moral mistakes. Minor weaknesses can make characters appear more 'human', more interesting, more like the viewer and thus more likeable. Idealised characters, on the other hand, are further away from the spectators' experience, appear artificial, and can evoke distance because they violate the need for 'realism' and plausibility or because they overfulfil norms and their strict morals seem to be far from life.

As indicated above, when we talk about 'intersubjective' values and norms, this is actually a simplification. Value systems differ according to reference groups and have different scopes and degrees of intersubjectivity. Accordingly, we can differentiate between universally or interculturally valid, cultural, and group-specific value systems, as well as individual preferences. Most values are culturally shaped; the affective reaction patterns associated with them are learned in social situations in which certain feelings are sanctioned as appropriate or inappropriate. Between acceptable and unacceptable qualities, there is a grey area within which viewers are willing to move, to go along with the character, to test their own value system imaginatively; and a limit beyond which they no longer do so and react with rejection. Maybe you still like a character who robs a bank, but not if they shoot someone in cold blood. There are many characters who 'go too far' in this respect and thus test the limits of value systems; think of Travis Bickle's murderous campaign against the pimps at the end of *Taxi Driver*.

16 See, for example, Min 2001; Schwartz 1999. The spectrum of values could also be divided into: individual/social, natural/artificial, physical/mental, instrumental/intrinsic, individual/universal, personal/impersonal, theoretical/practical, relative/absolute.

In all these cases, the application of values and norms is by no means impartial, but is influenced by group interests and individual biases, for example when characters are assigned to an in-group or out-group (see some of the previous chapters). For members of the in-group, the environment is more likely to be seen as responsible for negative actions, while for out-group members, the individual is blamed. As a rule of thumb, the closer viewers are to a character socially and the more similar they seem in terms of group affiliation, roles, and personality traits, the stronger the tendency is to evaluate the character positively. Furthermore, affective appraisals are often based on a social comparison of the viewers with the characters (Jauß 1984). A positive evaluation can evoke sympathy for average heroes at eye level. It can also take the form of admiration from a physically, socially or morally weaker position, for example in the case of Wonder Woman or Gandhi. Alternatively, it can come from a stronger position and lead to friendly appreciation combined with feelings of superiority (e.g., in the case of children and anti-heroes such as Lisa or Homer Simpson). Correspondingly, a negative appraisal can take the form of fearing a stronger character, disapproving of an equal, or patronising contempt for an inferior. Due to the group-related nature of most values and norms and the individual differences in their application, for example in social comparisons, the boundary between intersubjective appraisals and the varieties of subjective appraisal discussed below is blurred.

Appraisal According to Subjective, Individual, or Group-Specific Dispositions

Viewers not only evaluate characters according to largely intersubjective norms, but often also perceive them parasocially as imaginary partners of their own possible actions, assessing them as good or bad not according to collective norms and values, but rather according to their subjective self-interests (but still from an external observer's perspective). For example, they may experience a character as threatening, erotically desirable or in need of protection and develop further fantasies about them as imaginary lovers, group mates, friends or enemies. They flinch when the Alien seems to jump at them from the screen, can't take their eyes off desirable bodies and cheer along with imaginary political comrades. Such egocentric appraisals are explained differently depending on the underlying theoretical premises (see above). Approaches from evolutionary psychology might point to congenital 'affect programs' that automatically activate when certain stimuli are perceived; psychoanalysis to libidinal and destructive drives, early childhood experiences and acquired relationship patterns; or cultural studies and social psychology to group-specific interests and identities. Since affects can be traced back both to innate stimulus patterns and to various forms and layers of emotional memory, these explanations are again complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

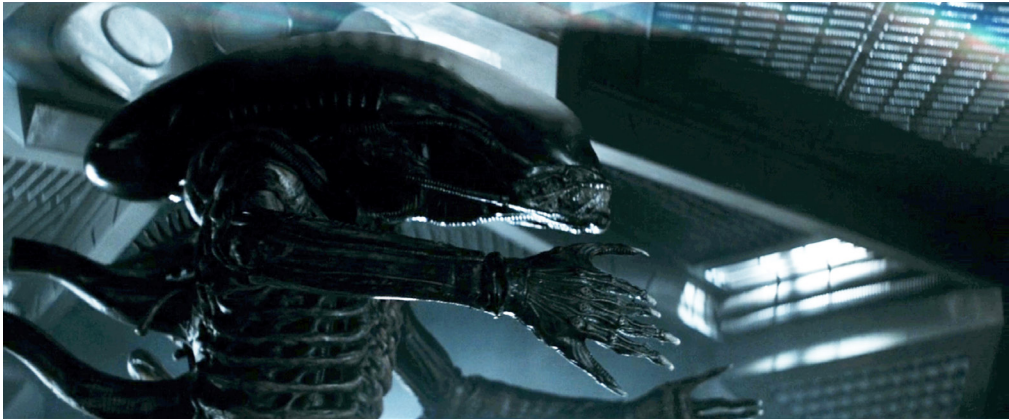


Fig. 52 Various features of the Alien trigger the danger schema, such as teeth, claws, slime, size, rapid approach, and an unusual body shape reminiscent of corpses and diverse biological species. (Dir. Ridley Scott, *Alien*, 1979, 20th Century Fox, USA. All rights reserved.)

There is some evidence that evolutionary ‘innate triggers’ evoke spontaneous affects and emotions when categorising characters (e.g., Tan 1996: 160–63; Grodal 1999; Schwender 2001). Most people seem to react preconsciously and involuntarily to certain facial and physical features that may signal advantages or disadvantages for the survival of the human species. For example, the baby schema (*Kindchenschema*)—the combination of a small body with a large, round head, big eyes, soft skin, and clumsy movements—tends to evoke feelings of cuteness and tender affection in many onlookers. Cues of danger such as teeth and claws, slimy skin or body deformities tend to trigger aversion, fear, and disgust because they are reminiscent of infectious diseases or dangerous animals (predators, parasites, poisonous creatures). Prototypically ‘male’ and ‘female’ body shapes and sexual characteristics, such as certain proportions between hips, waist, and shoulders, tend to trigger sexual desire in suitable groups of viewers. Such relatively reliable evolutionary triggers are specifically used to (stereo-) typify protagonists and antagonists. Sidekicks often have small external ‘flaws’ (such as a potbelly) that make them appear endearing. And some side characters also fulfil their narrative function quite inconspicuously, precisely because they have no special characteristics in the aforementioned respects. However, the effect of innate reaction tendencies on affection, fear, and desire for characters is also shaped by sociocultural factors. According to research on attractiveness, not only schemata of mating partner preference and signs of health, hormonal, and genetic makeup play a role in perceived attractiveness, but also feelings of familiarity fed by personal experiences and cultural stereotypes. Ideals of facial and body proportions seem to be based on the statistical average of a population in which individual irregularities are negligible.

However, the subjective, self-related appraisal of characters and their actions is shaped in even more diverse and complex ways by the viewers’ social experiences. Some positions on

social-psychology and cultural studies emphasise interests that are linked to social roles and group affiliations (e.g., Fiske 1997; see Chapter 5 and Chapter 8). Stereotypical characters are often already linked to certain—usually negative—affects through their perceived group membership, without a film having to provide more detailed information about them. Examples are the Jews, Russians, Germans, and Japanese in German and American propaganda films of the Second World War era, as well as Latinos, African Americans, and Arabs in Hollywood cinema up to the present day (Berg 2002; Bogle 2004; Shaheen 2001). Affective stereotypes and biases about nations or ethnic groups are sometimes based on actual group conflicts, but even then, they are largely imparted by the media (Berg 2002; Bar-Tal and Teichman 2005). All social groups and categories and their intersectional overlaps can influence subjective appraisal. Gender roles are particularly important here, as feminist film theory and queer studies have shown. The fact that the appearance, behaviour and personality of male and female characters are measured against gender-specific norms influences both their intersubjective evaluation and the subjective desires of many viewers. For example, 'feminine men' or 'masculine women' are usually less attractive to viewers who are orientated towards traditional gender roles. The group- and role-specific subjective appraisal can be moulded by experiences that are highly culturally specific. For example, characters in culturally specific professional roles can evoke affective memories in the audience; an example of this are the high school films of the Federal Republic of Germany, which nostalgically reappraise negative experiences with teachers and the authoritarian school system from the 1940s to the 1960s.

In a further step from the collective to the individual, from the intersubjective to the subjective, psychoanalytical film theories assume that emotional memory and the unconscious are primarily characterised by early childhood experiences and relationship patterns and focus on the resulting fears and libidinal desires of the viewers (e.g., Cowie 1997: Chapter 3, esp. 78f., 106). Following Freud, the fact that viewers desire certain characters could be attributed to a narcissistic libido based on feelings of similarity. Accordingly, they would desire or love aspects of a character that resemble what they themselves are, were or would like to be, based on acquired self-images and ego ideals. However, according to Freud, subjective appraisal could also be based on complementarity, for example by loving or desiring the nurturing mother, the protective father or their substitutes in the character. In such cases, the desire would be triggered by characteristics that are reminiscent of relatively specific relationships with one's own attachment figures. It is also conceivable that viewers not only desire the characters (or the stars who embody them), but also feel the desire to be desired or loved back by them. Other psychoanalytical theories list other possible subjective desires and fears, which are mostly of a sexual and psychopathological nature (e.g., Mulvey 1989): according to them, voyeurism could give pleasure through the unhindered observation of desirable characters, sadism through the idea of torturing them, or fetishism by making their body parts the object of libidinous arousal. The opposite pole to these desires would be fears, such as castration anxiety, the fear of being deprived of (not only sexual) power.

Without necessarily sharing the above assumptions, one can generally assume that the viewers' subjective appraisal of characters is based on innate reaction tendencies as well as on group-specific interests and on individual experiences from previous relationships. In principle, the explanations of different theories do not exclude but complement each other, resulting in a broad range of possible affective responses and different forms of desire, pleasure, fear, longing, or concern. The relative weight of these factors and processes is an empirical question that has not yet been answered. In character analysis, however, not only the explanatory power of the various theories, but above all the specificity of the respective films play a decisive role.

Forms of Empathy and Identification

The involvement with characters is often not only attributed to evaluations 'from outside' and taking sides with them, but even more to 'identification', 'empathy', or feeling with them. As outlined in Chapter 13, I understand these ambiguous terms in the sense of approaching a character's mental perspective on a situation or object, particularly their affective perspective. In the case of identification, viewers put themselves in the situation of a character, imagine they have some of their traits, or adopt their mental perspective in its most relevant aspects of perception, thought, evaluation, motivation, or affect. In the more particular case of empathy, spectators approach or simulate the character's affective perspective and develop affects that are in relevant ways similar to those of the character.¹⁷ When simplified: identification is perspective-taking, while empathy is affective perspective-taking. In contrast to sympathy as an ongoing disposition of feeling for a character, empathy is a situationally dependent feeling *with* a character.¹⁸ Sympathy is based above

17 I have elaborated this approach further in recent publications, e.g., Eder 2016b, 2017. My definition draws on that of Feshbach: 'Empathy is an emotion shared by an observer and an observed [...] I observe that someone is happy. I react with a similar feeling—perhaps not with the same intensity as that I have observed, but going in a similar emotional direction' (Feshbach 1989: 77). Others suggest similar, somewhat narrower definitions. Smith defines empathy as simulation of a character's feelings (Smith 1995, 1997, 1999), Neill as feeling the same emotions that the character has, based on an imaginative identification with them (Neill 1996), Plantinga (1999) understands empathy as feeling emotions congruent to those of the character (that is, corresponding to their wishes and desires) on the basis of imagining their feelings and thoughts (see also Gaut 1999, Brinckmann 1999, Wulff 2003). Two further groups of definitions seem less convincing to me. If empathy is understood as a 'reaction to information provided about a situation that evokes an acute emotion in another person' (Schneider 2000: 107) or as 'affect from bearing witness to the emotions of others' (Zillmann 1991), even *schadenfreude* over the suffering of a character would be included, which I find counterintuitive (see also Tan 1996). The following definitions also conflict with the common use of language, since they define empathy merely cognitively and separate it from affect: 'empathetic understanding refers to the psychological process whereby a person attempts to recognise and understand the statements, behaviour, or sensations of another person precisely from the perspective or according to the presumptions of this person' (Sachse 1993: 170); 'empathy – the ability to imagine oneself in another's place and understand the other's feelings, desires, ideas, and actions' (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, qtd. in Wulff 2001a: 1).

18 Cf. Neill 1996; Barker and Austin 2000: 113ff.; others such as Grodal 2001 use the terms in exactly the

all on a character's constant qualities, empathy on their momentary situation; one can empathise with suffering antagonists or other characters without finding them likeable.

How are film viewers made to feel this way? Different theoretical explanations of empathetic feeling-with characters or real persons can be linked (see Eder 2017):

- Somatic empathy: contagion through the character's physical behaviour (external action, facial expressions, gestures), based on an expressive cinematic presentation of their body and voice;
- Situational empathy: similar reactions of both character and viewer to affective stimuli perceived by both, based on the cinematic focalisation of the situation and its cues;
- Projective empathy: projection of the viewer's own feelings onto the character (beyond shared situations), based on non-diegetic film elements, narrator's comments and stylistic devices (e.g., music) that are inaccessible to the character; and
- Imaginative empathy: active imaginative or simulative exploration of the situation's meaning from the character's perspective, based on the narrative provision of information about the character and their situation (knowledge gaps, curiosity).

Somatic empathy is based on some kind of affective contagion, which makes viewers react directly and physically to a character's outward behaviour, particularly their expressions of emotion. Body movements, facial expressions, and voices are often 'contagious' in this sense, causing observers to imitate them involuntarily with corresponding physical reactions and affects (motor or affective mimicry; facial feedback) (e.g., Smith 1995: 98–102; Brinckmann 1999; Ekman 2003; Grodal 2001). This also applies to characters: their laughter, crying, or yawning, the sadness or cheerfulness of their faces and voices can be transferred to the audience. Some neuroscientific approaches attribute physical-affective empathy to the mirror neuron system in the brain. These are brain cells that are activated when observing the behaviour of others and cause a simulation of this behaviour and its accompanying sensations, an 'inner reflection' of the observed action in the mind and body of the observer (Gallese 2006). Thus it becomes understandable why the efforts of the climber in *Cliffhanger* cause involuntarily muscle tension in the spectators sitting in the cinema. Such relatively direct, involuntary, and physical transmission of affects requires a clear, intensively stimulating, illusionistic depiction of the characters' outward behaviour and affective expressions, which is a strength of film in comparison to other media.

In contrast, in cases of *situational empathy*, the audience does react less to the characters' expressive bodies, but more to the spaces that surround them and the events they are involved in. Spectators are given the impression that they share a cinematic space with characters, perceiving its affective cues and meanings together with them, as the film focuses their attention on similar objects, problems, or possibilities of action (see also Barratt 2006). This creates the impression of shared situations and 'joint attention' (Tomasello 2002), which may lead to shared affects in various ways. For example, visual and acoustic shocks and other sudden, intense stimuli can evoke autonomous body reactions (cf. Smith 1995: 98–102). Just like the character, you may flinch when a shot bangs, when Jake LaMotta is hit hard in *Raging Bull*, or when a cat suddenly jumps out of an opening in *Alien* (Baird 2000). However, situations can also activate more complex, comprehensive and long-term affective patterns. For example, a scene of separation could evoke memories of the viewer's own losses and create sadness. Or at the beginning of *Saving Private Ryan*, both the audience and the protagonist watch in horror and from the protagonist's perspective as an injured soldier picks up his own torn-off arm. In such cases, the character's emotions do not necessarily have to be visible, but the viewers can subliminally assume that the character has similar feelings to their own.

Such assumptions are also involved in what I call *projective empathy*, but in a different, more indirect and medium-specific way. Here, the viewers' affective responses are elicited by extradiegetic elements of the film which per definition cannot be experienced by the characters (or only in self-reflexive *mise-en-abyme*). For example, voice-over narration, music, sound design, camera movements, animations, or editing can elicit emotions, moods, or existential feelings in the viewers which are then projected onto a character.

The most complex form of empathy, which might be called *imaginative or simulative*, occurs when viewers actively and consciously put themselves in the position of a character through affective identification or simulation and take over their affective perspective by imagining and recreating their feelings in themselves.¹⁹ 'Putting oneself in the position of the character' means, among other things, that the viewers focus their attention and imagination on thoughts that the character is also occupied with, and that such imaginations direct the viewer's feelings. In these cases, the viewers rely on their emotional memory, on their own memories of comparable experiences, and their own wishes and fears to understand the character and to take on their feelings. On this basis, they may experience similar emotions as the character's but not exactly the same (such as diffuse sadness, but not painful grief). Individual experience and the

19 This largely corresponds to Smith's definition of empathy (1995: 96–98; 1997; see also Gaut 1999; Neill 1996). More precisely, in this narrower sense, empathy is the imaginative (simulative) understanding of the relevant psychological processes of another person or character in a particular situation, accompanied by the same kind of affects that the person or character experiences. In the case of characters, the relevant feelings are those that the narration focuses on in the scene.

ability to feel empathy influence how accurate and intense the affective reproduction of the characters' feelings will be. Simulative empathy can be supported by somatic, situative, and projective empathy, but requires more effort and more complex cognitive processes than the other forms. To a certain extent, the film's narration and style can nudge viewers into putting themselves in the position of a character. On the one hand, the films' multi-layered affective cues may provide a relatively detailed presentation of the character's personality and experiences. On the other hand, the situation must not be too easy to understand either, but must involve knowledge gaps that invite empathic curiosity, so that viewers can only understand the character if they take the effort to actively try and simulate their experience. Typified secondary characters usually do not require such imaginative effort, but empathic imagination is often necessary in the case of individualised protagonists, about whose inner life we learn only little, such as in many independent films by Chantal Akerman, Yasujiro Ozu, Alice Diop, Michelangelo Antonioni, or other auteurs.

The four forms of empathy are of course not separate, but interconnected and mutually reinforcing. An example for that are the 'scenes of empathy' as described by Carl Plantinga (1999), which create an intensive closeness to characters in essential phases of many films, often at the climax or towards the end. In these scenes the character is, often alone, in a situation that is important to them, such as when making difficult decisions, contemplating, remembering, experiencing triumph, or dealing with a loss or trauma. Through close-ups, tracking shots, or cut-ins, the camera emphasises the character's contagious facial and bodily expressions of emotion (somatic empathy). Resting longer on the character than necessary just to convey story information, the length of the take allows—and encourages—the audience to put themselves in the position of the character, to actively imagine their situational thoughts and empathise with their feelings (imaginative empathy). This is usually facilitated by music, sound design, and settings that convey an intense atmosphere (projective empathy). Examples include the elegiac boat trip of the identity-seeking female cyborg Kusanagi through the nocturnal city (*Ghost in the Shell*) or the pain-stricken visit to a fair after the protagonist learns of his son's death in *La stanza del figlio/The Son's Room*. Here, viewers are given time to become aware of what such an experience means and then to feel emotions that go in similar directions. The transitions from empathy to situational alignment, for example from shocked grief to compassion, are often fluid here; feelings are often evoked by both.

The form and intensity of all four forms of empathy are influenced not only by the sensitivity and empathy readiness of the audience, but also by their emotional memory and their individual, but often similar experiences. Thus, a character's personality or social role can evoke emotional memories of one's own experiences and increase the willingness and ability to put oneself in their position (*role identification* or *similarity identification*; Anderson 1996: 138–43). According to psychoanalytical theories, an unconscious reason for empathy and identification is often that the audience tries

developing the pleasant illusion of being like the character (*wishful identification*).²⁰ Some characters (or stars) represent what you would like to be; they stand out because of positive qualities that the viewers would like to have themselves in order to be respected, feared or loved by others and that thus correspond to their ego ideals or ideal self-images. Another reason for imaginatively putting oneself in the position of a protagonist could be their ability to live out forbidden desires, as well as their dominant position in the narrative and the structure of the gaze, such as a heightened representation in close-ups (Cowie 1997: 103f.). The audience may identify with the character in order to be rewarded with attention and feelings of agency, significance, and power.

Certainly, some of these hypotheses are speculative and need to be reviewed. Moreover, concepts like similarity identification and wishful identification would have to be defined more precisely: do they involve empathic perspective taking or positive subjective appraisal or both? For the time being, however, it can be stated that there are at least four forms of empathy: somatic, situational, projective, and imaginative. Some of them tend to run continuously and automatically through most of the film (such as co-experience through mirror neurons), others require more effort and are used more selectively (such as scenes of imaginative empathy). They all depend on the viewers' emotional memory and their capability to feel empathy. Moreover, they all interact with forms of external appraisal and attachment.

Situational Affects and Affective Dispositions: Sympathy, Antipathy, and Allegiance

The previous pages have argued that viewers react affectively to characters in at least three fundamentally different ways:

1. they appraise the physicality, personality, sociality, and behaviour of characters according to moral, aesthetic and other largely intersubjective criteria and react with moral or other evaluative emotions;
2. they assess the characters, their traits, and behaviour on the basis of subjective, individual dispositions or group-specific interests and react with more or less self-related affects such as fear for themselves or erotic desire, or with group emotions such as intergroup affinity or hostility; and
3. they share the characters' affects in certain situations through somatic contagion, joint attention, extradiegetic projection, or imaginative empathy.

20 E.g., Cowie 1997: 76f. Murray Smith also considers the possibility of vicarious wish fulfilment, but relates it to 'allegiance' with a character (1999: 221): we side with a character who has traits that we would like to have and subjectively value. Such wishes can even be immoral; however, Smith assumes that such 'perverse allegiances' with serial killers, criminals, etc. are rare and can generally be explained in relation to moral judgements.

These forms of intersubjective, subjective, and empathic appraisal are shaped by the viewers' imaginative closeness or distance to the characters and their perspectives. Together they contribute to the formation of more permanent dispositions of involvement with characters, particularly attitudes of sympathy, antipathy, and other overarching tendencies to have specific affects in given situations. When we like a character, we react to situations that affect them with 'pro-emotions': we fear for the character when they are in danger; we rejoice for them when they escape; we are sad when something happens to them. For characters we dislike, however, we hope that their endeavours will not succeed, feel *schadenfreude*, triumph over their downfall, or other 'anti-emotions'. Situational affects and affective dispositions influence each other mutually: the audience may like a protagonist because it evaluates his values and actions positively, but vice versa may also tend to appreciate his values and actions more because it likes him.

Sympathy and antipathy are thus crucial when viewers do not react directly to the characters themselves, but rather to the situations and events that affect them. In doing so, the viewers, as external observers, reconstruct the 'situational meaning structure' that the events have for the characters (Tan 1996: 44ff.), and their general pro- and anti-disposition leads to an affective siding for or against certain characters in the respective situation. In contrast to the empathy described above, viewers in such cases do not necessarily feel with the characters, but rather for them. They react with feelings of joy or relief, compassion or regret to events that have positive or negative consequences for the well-understood interests of the characters, their 'needs', which do not necessarily have to coincide with their external goals ('wants') (see Chapter 9 and Chapter 10). After the first encounter with Ilsa, Rick wants to hurt her, but from the viewer's point of view, the two should actually reconcile, so most viewers react to Rick's 'success' in hurting Ilsa not with satisfaction, but with regret, disapproval, and concern.

This kind of partisan involvement with the characters' situations is thus shaped on the one hand by the film's emphasis on the consequences for the character's well-being. On the other hand, this situational involvement presupposes that the viewers (believe they) know which plot development would be in the best interests of the character they feel for. This usually requires a relatively precise knowledge of the character's personality and relationships, especially their needs, as well as complex, often moral deliberations based on the film narrative. The attachment to the characters can also be influenced by the fact that their situations activate emotional memories of similar events in the viewers, even independently of the characters' interests. Such situational alliances with a character are by no means limited to present, but also future and past situations. We look forward to future entanglements with hope or fear, or are curious and wait for past traumas to be resolved and the character's secrets to be revealed. As the main characters try to achieve their goals and satisfy their needs, they usually encounter internal or external obstacles that lead to conflict throughout the film. Taking sides for or against the conflicting parties, the protagonists and antagonists, then develops into longer emotional episodes that change under the influence of new cues and intensify towards the end of the film.

14.4 Forms, Cues, and Contexts of Affective Involvement with Characters: An Overview

To summarise, there are at least the following basic forms of affective involvement with represented beings:

1. Curiosity and fascination with the unusual (unfamiliar, mysterious appearance or behaviour).
2. Sympathetic or antipathetic affects (feeling FOR the character) through external appraisal according to intersubjective criteria, including (a) moral norms and values (prosocial giving and antisocial taking) as well as (b) extra-moral values (such as beauty, intelligence, humour, or power).
3. Sympathetic or antipathetic affects (feeling FOR the character) through subjective external appraisal according to (a) individual or group-specific interests, including erotic desires, perceived threat, intergroup emotions, and other kinds of parasocial (imagined) interactions and relationships. Subjective appraisal also includes (b) similarity or role identification (responding to characters because they seem to be like oneself, have similar social roles, or offer social roles to one's imagination) as well as (c) wishful identification (responding to characters because they are how oneself would like to be or do what one would like to do).
4. Somatic, situational, projective, and imaginative empathy (feeling WITH the character based on an approximation to their affective perspective).
5. Siding with or against the character in situations that concern their interests and needs, based on dispositions of sympathy, antipathy, or empathy.

These different forms of character involvement correspond to different *affective cues* which films can emphasise through their narration and style, for example, through plot structure, acting, editing, camerawork, dialogues, sound design, or music.²¹ More specifically, affective cues are those aspects of characters and their situations that usually tend to elicit certain affects in a majority of viewers, such as the threatening characteristics of fearsome characters (fangs, weapons, aggressiveness, unscrupulousness, intelligence, strength), the desirable characteristics of erotic, attractive characters (physical, psychological, and social attractiveness), the vulnerability of helpless, cute characters, the courage and moral strength of characters suffering their fate with dignity and thus arousing pity, the moral virtues and prosocial actions of admirable heroes, the vices and crimes of despicable villains, or the surprising, harmless deviations from the norm of comic figures.

21 See also Carroll (1998a, 1999), who refers to films as 'criterially prefocused texts' that emphasise specific objects and aspects of represented situations, which correspond to the criteria for the appropriateness of certain emotions.

Table 12 summarises key elicitors that tend to evoke certain kinds of responses. For example, curiosity about a character can be created by their unusual traits or conspicuous gaps in relevant information about them. The cinematic focus on certain bodily features can make the character appear beautiful, cute, desirable, or strong. Physical and expressive behaviour serves as a frequent elicitor of somatic empathy. Information on mental and social traits can support a wide range of social, moral, and empathetic emotions. Pro- and antisocial actions form the cornerstone of moral evaluation and a main cause of situational allegiance. The depiction of the situations in which the characters find themselves usually emphasises aspects that significantly affect their needs and interests, such as the intensity of their love for another character, the murderous treachery of a trap, the suddenness of a loss or its terrible consequences. Characters' needs and interests can be conveyed through their actions, dialogues, or their display of emotions, such as the happiness of being loved again, the fear of being trapped, or the grief of loss. All this can intensify forms of feeling-for and feeling-with represented beings.

Textual (cinematic) cue	Affective reaction	Examples
<i>General narrative strategies</i>		
Presenting novel, unfamiliar or unusual features	General curiosity, interest, desire to understand	Unusual characters, or ordinary characters in unusual situations
Conspicuously withholding information about relevant traits	More specific curiosity	Secret out of the past, trauma
Extradiegetic cues, e.g., music, voice-over narration, audiovisual metaphors, other stylistic devices	Projective empathy	Mood music or elements of visual style projecting the character's moods or existential feelings Voice-over narrating events that will concern the character
<i>Focus on the body</i>		
Emphasising cuteness, mating partner, or threat schemata	Nurturing/care, sexual attraction, fear and loathing	Human and animal children, sex objects, predators and monsters in animation, advertising, porn, horror
Physical traits: beauty, strength, outward signs of psyche and sociality	Character as object: erotic desire, (moral) prejudices and biases Character as model: admiration, ego ideal Character as anti-model: disgust, nausea	Attractive protagonists and 'love interests' (often played by stars), action heroes; repulsive antagonists

<i>Focus on psyche and sociality</i>		
Non-moral values of personality and behaviour: intelligence, elegance, coolness, sexiness, humour, etc.	Appraisal according to intersubjective and subjective criteria Character as object: complex forms of desire Character as model: admiration, ego ideal Character as anti-model: disgust, nausea	Morally ambivalent but attractive characters: femmes fatales, gangsters, tricksters
Social relationships to other characters	Emotional memories of own personal experiences and relationships	Characters' relationships of love, family, friendship, rivalry, vulnerability etc.
Social roles and group identity	Social emotions based on in-group/out-group dynamics Sympathy/antipathy based on role or group identification Increased readiness to feel empathy (in-group) or block empathy (out-group)	Stereotypes of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, nation, religion, age etc.; Every-day heroes: office workers, mothers, etc.; Character constellations in disaster movies and other ensemble films
Social power; higher or lower, earned or unearned social status	Admiration, respect, compassion, or contempt	Powerful mafia dons, underdogs, braggarts, frauds
Breaking taboos and norms; enjoying luxury	Ersatz wish fulfilment, identificatory involvement	Character as aggressor, voyeur, rebel, living in luxury, breaking sexual and other taboos
<i>Focus on behaviour and action</i>		
Observable behaviour in general	Empathetic feeling-with characters' actions, based on mirror neurons	Constant flow of co-experiencing, as long as not blocked by other factors
Pro/antisocial actions (giving and taking), dialogue, motives, personality traits	Moral emotions based on judgements or intuitions	Exposition and contrast of protagonist's and antagonist's actions (petting vs torturing a dog), climax and decisive scenes, relationships between characters: couples, families, etc.

<i>Focus on characters' situations</i>		
Positive or negative consequences for the characters' needs and interests, especially in conflicts	Taking sides on the basis of sympathy or antipathy: pity, joy, (looking to the future:) hope, fear	Scenes of danger, rescue, triumph, winning or losing love interests, etc. Crises and borderline situations Intrigues and traps
Emphasising shared situations and joint attention to certain elicitors	Situational empathy	Chaotic, terrifying situations and drastic stimuli in war films Physical challenges in action movies Shared laughter in comedies Scenes of betrayal or loss in melodramas 'Body genres' (Williams 1991)
Signalling relevance of the situation and intense mental preoccupation of the character; withholding relevant information	Imaginative empathy (affective identification)	Scenes of loneliness, lack, or loss in melodramas or auteur cinema (Akerman, Antonioni, Ozu)
<i>Focus on characters' emotions</i>		
Facial and bodily expressions Music, visual, or acoustic shocks	Somatic empathy: emotional contagion through facial expressions and body language, Physical reactions shared with characters	Scenes of torture, shock, comic effects
Expression of emotions, music, dialogues, behaviour of others, narrative context	Somatic, projective, situational and imaginative empathy (affective identification)	Scenes of empathy (Plantinga 1999)
Expression of emotions, music, dialogues, behaviour of others, narrative context	Triggering affective schemata – empathy or projection onto the character	Prototypical situations such as separation, getting together

Table 12 Overview of typical cues and kinds of affective involvement with characters

The interaction of the various affective cues of the film, their intensities, dynamics, and impulses into viewers' experiences could be compared to the complex interaction of charged particles in electric fields that results in certain vectors. Affective cues can work together or against one another, they can strengthen, weaken, or redirect certain responses. For example, it is easier to empathise with characters one likes, but one may also like them because empathy helps one understand their feelings and motives

(Gaut 1999: 210). Many forms of interaction are possible. While different cinematic strategies can deliberately be combined to elicit mixed, ambivalent or conflicting affects (Eder 2002a, 2007), they are more often used in mutually reinforcing ways, steering the audience in the same affective direction. In terms of long-term (moral, ideological) effects, this tends to reinforce normative attitudes among viewers, but in other cases may also get them to adopt new values.

Involvement with characters is, of course, more than the sum of individual affective impulses or factors. The ancient Greek ideal of *kalokagathía*, of being both beautiful and good, still applies to many protagonists in mainstream film today. But anyone who would try to gear a character in all its physical, psychological, social, and behavioural traits towards maximum audience sympathy would quickly encounter problems and limits that are familiar from many superheroes, melodrama protagonists, or blatant clichés. Such characters quickly come across as inhuman, implausible, contrived, schematic, stereotypical, uninteresting, and are more likely to provoke boredom, ridicule, envy or other aversive reactions than sympathy. Social comparison kicks in: How am I myself compared to the character, why are they so much better than me? Perspective-taking becomes more difficult: a morally impeccable character who only ever does good, looks dazzling, is incredibly strong, skilful, intelligent, humorous, elegant, powerful, universally popular, etc., has nothing to do with the reality of human weaknesses, fractures and contradictions. Characters that are idealised in every respect are so far removed from the everyday experiences and abilities of the audience that ego identification and essential forms of empathy, the recognition and projection of one's own central challenges and life problems, are hardly possible with them. Furthermore, the attempt to maximise all positive traits as sympathy factors leads to (psycho- and socio-) logical contradictions between individual traits (who manages to perfect bodily, mental, and social skills at the same time?), and to tensions between the affective impulses associated with them. This already applies to traits that are associated with widespread intersubjective values, such as morality, cognitive or physical abilities. In the area of more subjective or group-specific desires and interests, it becomes completely unclear how the same character could, for example, be maximally desirable for viewers of all sexual orientations, or simultaneously appealing for all political positions.

The diversity of reactions to represented beings is embedded in and influenced by equally diverse contexts. Reactions to individual protagonists take place in the context of the character constellation; attention and affect are usually focused on several characters and their relationships (Chapter 10). The reactions to the characters, their relationships and situations are set in the temporal context of past and future events in the overall plot (Chapter 9). Character-related affects are also connected to moods and other affects that the film triggers independently of them, for example through the depiction of landscapes, spaces or natural events. Involvement with characters as depicted beings interacts with affective reactions to them as artefacts, symbols, and symptoms, for example to their aesthetic form, to higher meanings conveyed by them, and to their causes and effects in reality (Chapters 4, 11, 12,

16). Finally, the affects evoked by the film are related to the individual or collective reception situation at home or in the cinema and their generally pleasant moods and sensations. All these contexts influence how viewers experience characters.

The proposed model of perspectival appraisal and involvement with characters allows for a more differentiated analysis than other existing theories because it breaks down the various possible forms and factors of affective reactions in more detail. Empirical studies in media psychology and other disciplines usually only selectively pick out certain types of affective involvement from this spectrum of possibilities (such as moral judgement and sympathy) and ignore everything else. This means that they cannot do justice to the actual situation, especially in the case of more complex films, characters and nuances, and their validity is called into question. However, the model suggested here also describes a highly complex structure that is difficult to capture empirically. To facilitate application, I will now summarise the major points in the form of simplified typologies and patterns, concentrating on narrative cues related to characters as represented beings in a storyworld.

14.5 Typical Development Patterns of Affective Involvement

Affective response to 'realistic' characters of mainstream films in the global Northwest follows a typical developmental pattern (see Chapter 8 and Chapter 9). At first, there is interest, curiosity, and a need for orientation: the viewers have to focus their attention on the characters to understand them. The film directs attention predominantly to the protagonists and antagonists, creates knowledge gaps around them (who are they, what will they do?) and sets up basic relationships of imaginative closeness or distance to them (see Chapter 13). Protagonists are brought close to the viewers by presenting their experiences in detail and partly from their perspective; antagonists and secondary characters are usually kept at a greater distance (in terms of narration and perspective). As soon as a character appears in closer shots and begins to act, affective contagion through mirror neurons may set in, enabling a sensory and affective co-experience of their actions. This subliminal co-experience, as well as forms of curiosity about the characters, go on throughout the film as a kind of basso continuo of the affective symphony, a basis for more complex and intensive forms of involvement.

More particularly, the varying degrees of attention, curiosity, closeness, and bodily contagion underlie the perspectival appraisal of the characters. The narration and style of the film's exposition emphasise certain features of the characters' body, psyche, sociality, and behaviour, which are assessed by viewers according to intersubjective values and subjective interests. Regarding intersubjective values and norms, prosocial personality traits and actions of the protagonists are highlighted so that the audience evaluates them favourably from a moral point of view and begins to like them. They help other characters and give more than they take (this has become known in screenplay literature as the 'save the cat' principle). Moreover, protagonists are

often characterised as generally positive also in respect to other intersubjective norms, such as widespread standards of beauty, intelligence, or physical abilities. Social comparisons come into play here: average characters are experienced as similar to the viewer, heroes are admired, and underdogs are looked down upon with favour. In each case, positive appraisal leads to diverse reactions of affective appreciation, and attraction. From this, a lasting attitude of sympathy develops as a tendency to take sides with the protagonists in subsequent situations and especially in their conflicts. The protagonists' loyal helpers or their romantic partners sometimes appear just as likeable (think of Sam in *The Lord of the Rings* or the love interests in many romcoms).

However, viewers react not only to the protagonists and their helpers or partners, but also to other characters in the conflict constellation, especially their antagonists. Frequently, antagonists are portrayed as morally more negative than the protagonists, but superior to them in terms of power; this combination is intended to increase antipathy and fear. However, the characteristics of antagonists and the degree of imaginative closeness to them can vary greatly depending on the film and genre, and the affective reactions to them are correspondingly diverse. Some antagonists appear as morally equivalent to the protagonists (which leads to conflicting appraisals), some as their dark counterpart (such as the Shadow type in the hero's journey model), others as disturbingly alien monsters or psychopaths (as in horror films), others again as fascinating, seductive and desirable, such as the charismatic villains or femmes fatales of film noir.

While the evaluation of the protagonists, antagonists, and secondary characters according to intersubjective, especially moral values ensures a relatively high degree of congruence in the affective responses of the audience, the appraisal according to subjective self-interests usually leads to affective divergences between different viewers and audience groups (see also Eder 2018). In general, protagonists are matched to relevant in-groups of the target audience (e.g., in terms of race, class, gender, age, nation, religion, dis/ability, political views, and their intersectional connections). This aims to make the majority of viewers react with positive subjective appraisals, including similarity identification. However, cultural studies, feminist, queer, and postcolonial film theory rightly point out that this pattern of characterisation can lead to completely different character-related reactions in viewers who do not belong to the central target groups, including conflictual feelings of exclusion, anger, antipathy towards the protagonist or taking sides with other characters. This is all the more true when antagonists and evil supporting characters are portrayed as members of out-groups or social minorities, which is often the case.

Further divergences between audience responses are based on the viewers' sexual orientation and erotic interest. The main plot or subplot of most mainstream films tells a heterosexual love story between attractive men and women, and heterosexual viewers tend to react differently to the attractiveness of the protagonists and their romantic partners. For them, the character of the opposite sex tends to be more suitable as a parasocial object of desire, the character of the same sex as a starting

point for self-comparison or partial (similarity or wishful) identification. This often results in the following emotional constellation: the majority of the audience reacts to both the protagonists and their romantic partners with positive moral emotions and develops sympathy for both. However, this intersubjective sympathy is accompanied and shaped in different ways by erotic attraction and self-referential feelings. The erotic desire of some groups of viewers is directed towards the protagonists, that of other groups towards their romantic partners.²² Moreover, in Hollywood, Bollywood, and other mainstream cinemas, there is a typical imbalance in terms of gender: most of their protagonists are men, and the erotic attractiveness of their female love partners is often emphasised more strongly. Presumably, this makes it easier for heterosexual male viewers to take on the perspective of the male protagonist, while heterosexual women may shift between taking the perspective of the male protagonist, feeling desire for him, and experiencing forms of identification with his romantic partner. (In films with female heroines such as *Wonder Woman*, it may be the other way round.)

The relative weight of intersubjective and subjective (or group-specific), moral and amoral appraisals is a point at which film theories diverge: psychoanalytic theories emphasise subjective desires (e.g., Mulvey 1989; Cowie 1997), cognitive theories intersubjective appraisal (e.g., Smith 1995; Carroll 1999). In contrast to both, my approach suggests that one should avoid sweeping statements about the relative importance of intersubjective and subjective viewer reactions. Rather, this depends on the particular film sequences and audiences. Since most mainstream films aim to entertain as large and heterogeneous an audience as possible, it is reasonable to assume that they rely more heavily on intersubjective affect structures and moral judgement. In such cases, the role of the viewer's subjective desires and group interests would be comparatively weak or localised. However, this may be quite different for art, cult, or niche films or for genres that cater predominantly to specific target groups (porn, rom-coms, daily soaps, action movies, war films). Empirical studies on characters and affect should take this into account when choosing stimuli and probands. Even in mainstream film, there is a wide range of ways to guide affective responses, as intersubjective and subjective affect cues can be combined in different ways; affective responses can be focused on the main character or more evenly distributed across many characters; protagonists, antagonists, their helpers and love interests can evoke manifold moral and amoral responses; and antagonists can be characterised and judged quite differently, so that we can love the heroine and loathe her opponent, for example, or be torn between the two.

How our sympathies, antipathies, empathies, and desires are distributed across the constellation of characters has an effect on our affective response throughout the film. In the exposition phase, the appraisal of the characters themselves is in the foreground.

22 Of course, all that can include homoerotic reactions, but they will be less frequent or dominant.

Once this has been provisionally concluded and more stable affective dispositions and allegiances established, attention tends to centre on the significance of events and conflicts for the characters. The interests and experiences of the characters, their goals, motives, and feelings become the most important affective cues. When a conflict emerges, at the latest, we gain an idea of which future developments would be in the interest of the protagonist and which against. The conflict thus intensifies our siding with the hero and against the antagonist who threatens their interests. (The heroes can also stand in their own way, for example by not being aware of their real interests and pursuing the wrong goals.) We judge all subsequent events regarding their effects on the hero's interests and react with feelings such as disappointment, relief, joy, or sadness, as well as with character-related suspense in the form of hopes and fears. Will the hero make it and solve the conflict? This adoption of the perspective and taking sides with the character, which is subliminally accompanied by the physical-affective experience of the actions and develops into a continuous emotional episode, accounts for a large part of the emotional effect of mainstream films.

At the same time, this emotional episode is accentuated and influenced by various more local feelings of empathy, curiosity, and appraisal. The moment in which the conflict arises is often also a moment of situational or imaginative empathy with the protagonist. This becomes clear in stories of coping with a loss. The conflict is triggered here by the hero losing something important, for example when loved ones die or the hero falls terminally ill. Frequently, this moment is brought as close as possible to the viewers through 'scenes of empathy', which in turn also reinforce their sympathy. While establishing the conflict, films also often convey hints about the characters' secrets, which aim to make the viewers curious. We want to know the missing information about them and their past (what happened in Paris between Rick and Ilsa?).

Once the conflict is established, it escalates over several stages and plot twists, and the protagonist's risks and the intensity of our affective involvement with them increase accordingly. Again and again, we assess the behaviour of the characters in individual situations that readjust or deepen our opinion of them, make them more or less likeable, make us doubt them or surprise us. These situations can also activate affective schemata and emotional memories, triggering moods and feelings such as cheerfulness, sadness, anger or disgust, which can be projected onto the characters. This affective development is accentuated by moments in which we feel similar as the character through somatic, situational or projective empathy—for example, in shared startle reactions or in scenes in which we react to contagious facial, vocal and physical expressions. Key scenes, often at turning points in the plot, create a more intense closeness through active, imaginative empathy. The true interests of the characters become increasingly clear, our involvement with them becomes more focused and therefore more intense. In the course of the plot, the protagonists' secrets can be revealed, their traumas healed and their needs satisfied, which we experience as satisfying.

The affect structure of mainstream films aims to ensure that this dynamic interplay of different forms of affective involvement develops through ever new moments of curiosity, suspense and surprise. The aim is for the viewer's affective experiences to intensify during this roughly two-hour episode until they culminate in the resolution of the conflict and finally end in pleasant reassurance. The interests of the protagonist are usually satisfied, the downfall of the antagonist can fill us with *schadenfreude*. The climax of our attachment to the protagonist is often followed by an empathic conclusion that corresponds to the initial empathy scene at the origin of the conflict. Now we can experience the resolution of the conflict from the affective perspective of the protagonist, the fulfilled revenge, the overcome grief, the realisation of their own growth.

To summarise, the typical development of affective involvement with characters across the narrative structure of mainstream films can be outlined as follows:

- At the very beginning of the film, curiosity, the desire to understand the character and the subliminal co-experience of its perceived bodily behaviour begin and continue throughout the film.
- In the film's exposition, dense characterisations of the central characters enable their preliminary intersubjective and subjective appraisal, leading to moral and non-moral emotions, subjective desires, egocentric affects, and group-specific identifications and allegiances. On this basis, more stable attitudes of sympathy for protagonists and antipathy towards antagonists usually develop.
- Once the main conflict of the plot has been established at the end of the exposition, viewers are often made to feel with the protagonists to a certain extent through cinematic techniques of somatic, situational, projective, or imaginative empathy. This in turn also increases the willingness to sympathise with them and to take their side in the subsequent conflict development. In addition, secrets or traumas of the main characters can be hinted at to intensify curiosity about them, and certain moods and feelings can be associated with them, for example through the visual style or music.
- During the increasing development of conflictual events over the main part of the film plot, the focus is on situationally changing emotions of sympathising and empathising with the protagonist (such as joy, hope, tension, relief). However, they are by no means the only affective reactions; depending on the situation, others can emerge that can be directed towards other characters: for example, feelings of antipathy towards the antagonist, subjective and intersubjective appraisals of important secondary characters, desire for them or empathy with them, accentuated moments of reappraisal, affective contagion through emotional expressions, or comic relief, curiosity, and surprise.

- When the film culminates with the strongest confrontation between the opponents and the resolution of the conflict, the most intense emotions of partisan involvement should also arise with the protagonist, whose needs are either satisfied or not, leading to relief and joy or disappointment and sadness.
- The film often ends in scenes of satisfied sympathy and empathy, in which the (exhausted, relieved, happy...) state of the protagonist can be appraised and partly shared.

Of course, this brief overview of the typical trajectory of involvement with characters in mainstream film only outlines a very basic and general affect structure, and other types of films beyond the Western mainstream may aim at quite different affective developments.

In addition, involvement with characters is further differentiated according to various genres that have typical affect patterns of greater specificity (cf. Carroll 1999, Grodal 1999). For example, 'body genres' (Williams 1991) like porn and horror emphasise certain physical features of the characters that are intended to activate innate reaction tendencies. In horror films, for example, the teeth, claws, deformities, slimy skin, or creepy movements of the monster as well as the injuries of its victims are intended to generate fear and disgust. In pornography, the focus on sexual organs and activities as well as on the features of mating partner schemes is intended to evoke sexual arousal. Many animated films and films with child protagonists make use of the cuteness schema, which is often exaggerated or anthropomorphised and transferred to animals in order to create feelings of tenderness, caring, and affection.

Action films, again, concentrate on the physical behaviour of the heroes, on their athletic or acrobatic movements, fights, the tension of their muscles and faces, so that the actions can generate affective contagion; in addition, explosions and other visual and acoustic shocks can be experienced by heroes and viewers simultaneously. Physical co-experiences of a different, rhythmic-musical kind are a major attraction in the song and dance scenes of musicals or Bollywood films, often combined with elements of melodrama or romantic comedy. The last two mentioned genres also often focus on the social level of activating emotional memories, such as personal experiences of personal bonds, desires and dreams related to gender roles, beauty, status, and attractiveness, as well as values and cultural characteristics of moral judgement of relationships in terms of loyalty, passion, and sensitivity.

Many Westerns and war films focus partly on similar aspects of moral value systems, such as sacrifice and loyalty, but also more strongly on norms such as courage, strength or toughness, which are associated with male gender roles. In addition, the characters' affiliation to ethnic or national groups, which are associated with affective stereotypes and prejudices, is of particular importance in these genres. Typical affective relationships are often established with protagonists and antagonists: propaganda

films promote attachment to the 'good' characters of the in-group and antipathy towards the 'evil' characters of the out-group. The distribution of sympathies is less clear in gangster films and film noir: often, gangsters and hard-boiled detectives or police officers differ only gradually from each other in moral terms, so that viewers can have ambivalent, fragile sympathies for both sides; the corruption of law enforcement officials or the code of honour of criminals are frequently emphasised. The femme fatale can evoke conflicting combinations of moral condemnation and desire, of admiration and vicarious wish fulfilment; in the type of the 'good-bad girl' this tension between opposing responses is dissolved by showing that she was only seemingly evil.

Genres also differ in their dominant perspectives and the degrees of imaginative closeness to their characters. Melodramas (but also many anti-war films) aim for the greatest possible closeness to the protagonists and hardly ever do without scenes of empathy. Comedies, satires, moral stories, and grotesques, on the other hand, leave the characters at an emotional distance, prevent empathy and identification, and let the viewers look down from a superior perspective and laugh at the characters' socially deviant traits, surprising mishaps, or social mistakes. Musicals, dramedies, and tragicomedies are particularly interesting in this respect, as they often alternate between closeness and distance in various ways; they usually contain empathetic scenes, but also many comic and self-reflective moments.

The self-reflexive distance of many musicals and comedies already indicates that characters are not only perceived as represented beings. Across genres, there are types of films and characters in which the affective cues of the diegesis or storyworld interact intensely with, or are even overlaid by, other levels of affective response. In this respect, Chapter 4 has distinguished between diegetic, artificial, symbolic and symptomatic types of characters, each of which primarily addresses a particular aspect of audience response. A few examples may now illustrate the affective consequences.

In the case of *artificial characters*, the audience's attention focuses more than usual on their presentation through acting and film style, which can be assessed as aesthetically more or less successful. This is the case, for example, with characters played by well-known actors whose performance is particularly appreciated (for instance Forest Whitaker in *The Last King of Scotland*). The artistic and technical quality of animation can be admired in characters in special effects or animation films, such as their uncanny realism (*Terminator 2*, *Jurassic Park*) or their originality and metaphorical force (*Yellow Fever*). In experimental and avant-garde films, characters are often deliberately deconstructed or their means of representation made conspicuous; this can cause specific affects such as surprise, irritation, frustration, immersion in the play of colours and forms, or intensification of sensual perception and be acknowledged as an aesthetic innovation (*Cet obscur objet du désir*; *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*).

Unusual, striking formal elements can also be a means of drawing attention to indirect, symbolic or thematic meanings of characters. Symbolic characters require viewers to pay more attention to these overarching meanings, and they too appear in various forms.

some are explicit allegories or personifications, such as Death in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* or Fritz Lang's *Destiny*. In propaganda or religious films, symbolic characters often serve as mouthpieces or embody religious, political or ideological messages. The audience's affective reactions to such characters are often based less on their concrete characteristics as depicted beings than on how they judge their higher meanings, whether they enthusiastically agree with them or angrily reject them.

The viewers' anger or approval can also be directed at the creators of the character, the filmmakers. In this case, viewers react affectively to characters as *symptoms*. Thoughts about their production and reception, their actual causes and effects, can trigger different types of affect. Among the most common are probably reactions to stars. On the one hand, stars can merge with the character and transfer elements of their image to the being portrayed. In other cases, however, the star as a real person remains in the foreground and viewers primarily admire and desire the famous actor, while the being embodied by them becomes secondary, merely a vehicle for the star's presence. Characters can also refer to other admired or despised, loved or hated members of the film team, e.g., screenwriters such as Charlie Kaufman in *Adaptation*. Another cause of symptom-based affects are ideas about other audiences and their presumed reactions. Viewers may see the character as a bad example of youth and react with anger or rejection, or as a point of reference shared with other viewers who they believe are as excited or disgusted by the character as they are. In this way, the characters of scandalous and cult films (*Hair*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *A Clockwork Orange*) make it possible to feel a sense of belonging to like-minded communities of fans or haters.

Such affective reactions to characters as artefacts, symbols, and symptoms—and their multiple interactions with the audience's responses to depicted beings—require closer examination. The proposed model of affective involvement with characters makes it easier to integrate them in a systematic way and to consider their relative potential effects. At this point, however, it is high time to illustrate the hitherto abstract considerations with an example.

14.6 An Example: Affective Involvement with Characters in *Casablanca*

Casablanca is an instructive example of how the different forms of involvement are interrelated.²³ The affective responses to this classic film and its characters have been explained in widely diverging ways, such as in the following theses by other authors:

1. The film evokes suspense and nostalgia because the ambivalent motives of the main characters make their actions unpredictable and can only be understood in the context of their past (Smith 2003: 151–68).

²³ The following analysis is partly based on Eder 2008a; it could be extended by making use of the results of previous chapters.

2. The audience reacts with 'socially based emotions' to Rick Blaine, who sacrifices his love for Ilsa for a higher, altruistic goal (Zag 2005: 161).
3. The viewers participate in Rick's cathartic development into an ideal combination of virility and morality (Holland 2006: 17–35).
4. With narcissistic and voyeuristic pleasure, male viewers share Rick's agency, his desiring gaze on Ilsa and the removal of the castration threat associated with her. In contrast, female viewers are forced to identify with either this male view or with Ilsa's position as a passive object (following Mulvey 1989).
5. The viewer experiences a satisfying resolution to the Oedipal conflict between Rick, his desired 'mother' Ilsa, and his moral 'father' and rival Victor Laszlo (Gabbard and Gabbard 1990).
6. Viewers enjoy the end of the film because it combines three reasons for the dissolution of a love relationship: the foreseeable waning of love, the narcissistic gain for the one who breaks up, and the sadistic retribution for previous rejections (Žižek 1995).
7. The mass of archetypes and stereotypes in the film—not least among its characters—leads to a wealth of intertextual resonances that can be enjoyed with fascination (Eco 1985).

My approach to understanding affective involvement with characters and the central concept of perspectival appraisal allow such heterogeneous theses to be evaluated and integrated into a larger, more systematic context. I cannot go into detail here, but I will at least outline some essential contours.

The variety and complexity of affective responses to the characters in *Casablanca* is particularly evident in relation to Rick Blaine as the protagonist. We have already seen how the film arouses an intense curiosity about Rick and makes him appear mysterious by withholding relevant information about him in the exposition and later creating gaps in knowledge about his past and his love affair with Ilsa. Later, these gaps are partially filled by dialogue and nostalgic flashbacks, but then the audience is again left in the dark about Rick's plans regarding Ilsa, Laszlo and Strasser, which heightens suspense. Thesis 1 highlights these narrative strategies.

Moreover, the moral appraisal of Rick, his actions, and his development is of central importance. At the beginning of the film, he is still at odds with many moral norms and values, concerning, for example, selfless love for Ilsa, respect for Laszlo, consideration for their marriage, the fight for freedom, and his responsibility towards other refugees and the café staff. Although Rick shows moral potential right from the start, he initially behaves predominantly egocentric: he 'sticks his neck out for nobody', turns Ugarte in, humiliates Yvonne, insults Ilsa, refuses her and Laszlo the urgently needed visas, and comes between husband and wife. However, his behaviour changes increasingly in the

course of the film; for example, as he supports Laszlo against the Nazis and enables a young couple to escape. In the end, he has changed profoundly and has become a morally responsible person of integrity who shows loyalty to the most important in-groups and makes personal sacrifices for the greater good. Accordingly, the moral assessment of him gradually changes from feelings of disapproval to hope, respect, admiration, and other 'socially based emotions', as mentioned in thesis 2.

However, the moral evaluation of Rick is neither solely decisive for the viewers' responses nor is it impartial. (Ask the 'usual suspects' arrested in Rick's place!). Rick's change is suggested from the outset in that he is the hero of the story and other characters say good things about him. Moreover, many other appraisals based on *non-moral criteria* come into play. Rick is the focus of everybody's attention and has a high status within the dangerous microcosm of Casablanca. He is competent, elegant, successful as a bar owner, and attractive to beautiful women like Ilsa and Yvonne. Rick's expressive appearance and his way of speaking convey an impression of toughness, sensitivity, humour, and life experience (reinforced by Bogart's star image). His behaviour, facial expressions, and gestures radiate sovereignty and coolness. He is laconic, but quick-witted, nearly always proves to be superior to other characters, and his abilities and power receive recognition, even admiration by most of them. This may invite parasocial desires and fantasies in viewers. They may perceive Rick also according to their *subjective interests*, for example as a potential friend, lover, or role model, and react with associated emotions, such as friendly affection, erotic desire, or wishful identification. For male and female viewers, Rick is presented, as thesis 3 puts it, an ideal combination of virility and morality, which can be admired, desired, and fantasised about. However, this might also involve diverging responses of male and female, heterosexual and homosexual viewers, as pointed out in thesis 4.

During the film, such subjective and intersubjective appraisals of Rick condense into lasting affective dispositions of sympathy and empathy readiness. On this basis, the audience reacts affectively not only to Rick's physical, mental, and social traits, but also to the situations in which he finds himself: they take his side and feel both with him and for him. *Empathising* with Rick, experiencing similar affects, itself has different sources, which are mentioned in none of the above theses. Situational empathy plays a significant role, as viewers largely perceive the same situations and possibilities for action as him, often even from his perspective, and can react to them with similar wishes and emotions (such as sharing his desire to keep the arrogant German bank manager out of his casino). At other times, projective empathy sets in, for instance, when melancholy music or other elements of audiovisual style create moods that are intended to resemble those of Rick. In scenes of somatic empathy, observing Rick's physical behaviour and emotional expressions (his sad look, his stern voice) can have a contagious effect and make the viewers to co-experience some aspects of his actions and affects. More conscious forms of imaginative empathy also seem to be relevant, as *Casablanca* provides its narrative information in a way that repeatedly leaves it open to

interpretation, inviting viewers to simulate Rick's inner life, such as his contradictory feelings for Ilsa and Laszlo. This can require them to actively put themselves in his shoes, for example by drawing on their own experiences and memories.

Most of the processes mentioned are probably related to *emotional memory*. Not only can understanding Rick's inner conflicts activate memories of own experiences, intersubjective and subjective appraisals are also usually anchored in memory, and can be traced back to acquired norms and values, or interests, fears and desires. However, it is unlikely that these memories are as exclusively shaped by early childhood relationships as some psychoanalytic approaches assume, and the above thesis 5 that Rick, Ilsa, and Victor evoke above all memories of Oedipal desires and feelings of guilt seems far-fetched for several reasons.²⁴ It cannot be excluded that the film's ending evokes affective memories of own separations, as thesis 6 suggests, but its focus on lustful fantasies about empowering relationship breakdowns does seem a little contrived and idiosyncratic.

Rather, various forms of affective involvement combine, interact and intermingle in the viewers' experience. Moral appreciation, non-moral admiration, empathic co-experience, subjective desires and emotional memories differ in their degree of intersubjectivity, but all can contribute towards the viewers having sympathy for Rick. They are now disposed to take Rick's side in changing situations in the film plot and to reacting with corresponding emotions. Their *affective allegiance* (*affektive Parteinahme*) is based on their perception of Rick's interests, even those that he may not be aware of. For example, when he insults Ilsa, this is due to his resentment that she has left him, but his real need would be to reconcile with her—so viewers are more likely to disapprove of or regret his behaviour.

To summarise, the viewers' affective reactions to Rick take various forms depending on the perspectives the viewers adopt and how these influence their appraisal of Rick and his situations. This appraisal shifts between subjective and intersubjective, egocentric and allocentric perspectives. Audience affects are thus based on moral and non-moral, intersubjective and subjective evaluations, on different forms of empathy, on the activation of emotional memories, on taking sides in changing situations and reacting to a storyworld with shared meanings and action potentials. Depending on the film sequence, they can be based to a greater or lesser extent on intersubjective values, on subjective desires and memories, or on the perception of the characters' interests and emotions.

So far, the focus has been on Rick as the protagonist who attracts the most attention. Overall, however, the audience's affective involvement is divided among several characters. Ilsa is another important focus, since she is torn between her loyalty to Laszlo and her passion for Rick, which evokes sympathy and may call up one's own memories. Her handling of the conflict, her courage, beauty, elegance, dignity,

24 This explanation is problematic for a number of reasons. It raises the question of what female viewers experience, why one should identify exclusively with Rick and why should the supposed Oedipal relationship between Rick and Ilsa be thought of as a mother-son relationship and not, for example, as a father-daughter relationship.

sensitivity, and intensity of feeling invite the viewers to judge her positively and feel sympathy for her. Many close-ups show Ilsa's face, accompanied by melancholic music, its emotional expression eliciting empathy with her sadness. How strong empathy is felt and to what extent other affects arise, such as erotic desire, emotional memories, or even feelings of superiority (as posited by some of the above theories), probably depends on the dispositions of the audience members.

Characters are not only assessed individually, but also in their constellation and in their different configurations in certain scenes. The triangular relationship between Rick, Ilsa, and Laszlo develops along changing structures of affective involvement, sometimes quite concretely: which of the characters within a three-shot do I look at, to whose emotional expression, whose interests, whose outward actions do I pay attention to and react to most? Editing, image, and sound design convey a dense palette of affective stimuli, some of which focus on individual characters or details, while others rather convey an overall impression of the situation. Such overall reactions can partially be traced back to the activation of 'emotional scripts' that relate to learnt norms and values (cf. Bartsch and Hübner 2007: Chapter 8). In general, situations are presumably perceived and evaluated in terms of the interests of the main characters with whom the viewers sympathise and empathise.

In all this, the affective involvement with characters has a specific temporality. While the affective cues of a film can change from one moment to the next, it is unlikely that the viewers' affects will immediately change accordingly. In shot-reverse-shot editing, we don't experience two seconds of admiration for Rick and then three seconds of empathy with Ilsa. Instead, an overarching experience develops, an emotional overlay and modulation that is also carried by longer-lasting moods. This depends on the temporal interaction of the stimuli, as well as the inertia of cognitive and physical-affective processes. In other words, the specific timing of the film and its affect structure, of when exactly certain affective cues are foregrounded, matters. Perhaps this can be compared to taste experiences: if we taste a spoonful of liver pâté and immediately afterwards a spoonful of chocolate pudding, the result is not pleasure but disgust; it is different if we eat one as a first course and the other later as a dessert.

In *Casablanca*, the affective stimuli are assembled in such a coherent way that longer-term, condensed emotional processes emerge, which begin with direct sensations and perceptions and develop across various forms of perspectival appraisals and narrative emotions. Viewers not only evaluate the storyworld, its characters and events, but also grasp further, *symbolic, or higher-level meanings* on this basis, to which they also react affectively. Rick's decision to give up Ilsa, for example, conveys the general moral of the film that personal interests should be put aside in the interests of the community, and Rick himself can be understood as a symbol for the USA in Second World War, as a warning to Americans and as a call to break away from isolationism and join the war against the Nazis. The audience can react to such moral and political messages with various thematic emotions such as patriotic pride, approval, or anger and mistrust. The

themes and meanings with which the characters are associated can also be relevant to the viewers' own lives and have different meanings for their identity.

Finally, on another, *symptomatic* level, viewers may reflect on the causes, effects, and elements of the film and its characters, such as the design of the film as an artefact, the filmmakers, themselves or other audiences. This can trigger communicative emotions: viewers may admire the filmmakers for their political commitment or artistic achievement, feel repelled by sexist or racist tendencies, be proud of their own connoisseurship or ashamed of their sentimental tears. Such feelings are closely linked to the characters: one's attitude towards Rick and Sam can be uncomfortable in retrospect for having ignored the racist inequality of their relationship (as Holland 2006 describes). Other reactions at this level may include the pleasurable recognition and experience of familiar stereotypes (thesis 7 above).

While watching mainstream films and their characters, thematic and communicative emotions are rarely at the forefront of consciousness, but they can still have a significant impact. They often become noticeable towards the end of the film and later, after viewing, they frequently shape the way the film is discussed and the associated audience emotions. Corresponding responses are particularly dependent on the individual and group-specific dispositions of the viewers and therefore often vary widely. Therefore, I leave thematic and communicative emotions out of consideration when I describe the affective impact of the final scene of *Casablanca* below (Figure 53); elsewhere I have shown in more detail how important they can be for reactions to controversial films and characters (Eder 2007a, 2018). While I have so far mainly focused on narrative strategies of guiding character involvement, I will now at least to some extent also consider the more subtle and more elusive cues of the audiovisual form.



Fig. 53 The farewell scene from *Casablanca*. (Dir. Michael Curtis, *Casablanca*, 1942, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. All rights reserved.)

Up to the famous farewell of Rick and Ilsa, the following has happened: since Rick refuses to give Victor Laszlo the visas, Ilsa visits him at night in his apartment (climax). She begs and threatens him in vain, finally collapses and confesses her love to him. After a passionate kiss and perhaps more (the film provides contradictory cues), Ilsa explains that she can never leave him again, he must now think for them all. Thus, central questions of suspense and curiosity are answered provisionally, in a way that assigns Ilsa a passive role from now on, while Rick plays the active role (which supports thesis 4 above). Rick then develops a plan. He sells his café and suggests to Captain Renault that he will lure Laszlo into a trap with the visas; he himself wants to flee with Ilsa. The vague fear that Rick is capable of this betrayal (short-term suspense) is disproved (relief). He forces Renault to drive to the airport with him, Ilsa, and Laszlo, not knowing that the Nazi Major Strasser has been notified. The scene itself now develops in two phases: first Rick's farewell to Ilsa, then his confrontation with Strasser, whom he shoots, and with Renault, with whom he becomes allies. I am focusing on the first phase here. The viewers are already at a high arousal level and are confronted with a bundle of new suspense questions: What will happen to Rick, Ilsa, and Laszlo? Will they be able to escape before Strasser arrives? How will Rick solve the problem that there are only two visas? A deadline—ten minutes before departure—increases the pressure.

The scene starts without music. The airport is immersed in night and fog, the picture is more open, the spectrum of grey tones shows less contrast than before, in the background the contours blur into nothingness, lights set rhythmic accents. The perceptual stimuli present a basic mood somewhere between melancholy and drama. Events develop rapidly: while Laszlo takes the luggage to the plane, Rick tells Renault to fill in the names in the visas: *Mr. and Mrs. Victor Laszlo!* Renault and Ilsa look at him in astonishment: he's not flying with her? The leitmotif 'As Time Goes By' sets in, the camera tracks into Rick's and Ilsa's heads in profile (Figure 53). When she realises his intention to stay behind, she protests vehemently. Her gestures, facial expressions, breathing, and voice signal desperation. He answers her with a quick series of arguments: to stay with him would be too dangerous, and she would regret leaving Victor all her life. As Rick speaks, the camera pulls in tighter and a series of point-of-view shots alternately show Rick's distinctive features and Ilsa's delicate face, shot slightly from above in soft-focus, framed by shadows. Apparently, Rick's arguments convince her, the tension in her gaze gives way to sadness, her lips tremble, tears form in her eyes, the musical leitmotif becomes softer. Ilsa now speaks directly about the relationship with Rick: 'And what about us?', to which he replies, 'We'll always have Paris'. Ilsa fights for a smile: 'And I said I would never leave you'. Rick assures her, 'And you never will', and justifies his decision politically and morally: '...it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world'. He calms her: 'Here's looking at you, kid'. She looks up at him and smiles through tears, her eyes signalling agreement.

This famous farewell dialogue is the culmination of a longer, complex emotional development. On the perceptual level, it is underpinned by low-key lighting, a balanced composition centring on the characters, and the leitmotif 'As Time Goes By', whose major minor modulations are affectively charged by earlier moments in the film. All in all, the perceptual cues invite a 'beautifully melancholic' basic mood. The diegetic level focuses attention on Rick and Ilsa and brings together numerous emotional stimuli in a mutually reinforcing way. The repeated positive appraisals of Ilsa and Rick have built up sympathy for both, along with a tendency to evaluate the situation according to their interests. However, the following conflict remains—the love between Ilsa and Rick endangers the obligation towards Victor, thus also the moral integrity of the lovers (and thus the film's thematic message). The conflict is dealt with in three steps, in which Rick and Ilsa must also convince the audience that his decision provides a satisfactory solution. In the first, dramatic phase Rick refers to practical reason and conjugal fidelity, in the second, elegiac phase he assures Ilsa of his continuing love, in the third, energetic phase he relativises their common sacrifice by referring to political responsibility. That Ilsa signals agreement—albeit reluctantly—means that her interests have been safeguarded. This closes the story arcs: Rick has overcome his inner conflict. The moral integrity of Rick and Ilsa remains untouched. Victor and Ilsa will escape from the Nazis. Now only the question remains what will happen to Rick himself.

However, the morally satisfying—and Production Code compliant—resolution of suspense in the plot is only one element of the emotional effect. The situation of parting may remind many viewers of their own experiences of separation or loss. The imaginative relationship to the characters is also important in this context. The series of POV shots alternately conveys the visual perspective and facial expression of both characters. The close-ups give the impression of physical closeness, make it possible to observe the facial expressions in detail, and to be infected with sadness by Rick's serious gaze and Ilsa's tears.

It is possible to empathise with each of the two characters, whose feelings and behaviour differ considerably. Rick, older and (thanks to camera perspective) also bigger, takes over the active part, Ilsa is helplessly overwhelmed by his flow of speech. He shapes the situation according to his will and shows that he is sure of his decision, which has restored and reinforced his identity. Rick now embodies an 'admirable' combination of moral goodness and (male) power (cf. Holland 2006: 34). However, it remains questionable whether the viewers identify (only) with him. In another respect, there is more closeness to Ilsa: like her, first-time viewers do not know the exact reasons for Rick's decision yet and first have to be convinced of it. In addition, their emotional memories may relate more closely to an 'Ilsa role' in their own experiences. Therefore, it depends largely on the viewers' individual or group-specific dispositions whether they tend to judge the characters from an external perspective or a partial identification with one of them takes place.

After the emotional last dialogue between Rick and Ilsa, his decision is confirmed by the events that now intertwine like clockwork, satisfying desires for harmony,

development, catharsis, and social correctness. Rick's actions win Victor Laszlo's gratitude and recognition (stressing the protagonist's erotic dominance in the love triangle) and convince Renault to accompany him to fight in the resistance. After Strasser has been punished by a fatal shot, the film ends with the consolation of a 'beautiful friendship', humorous exchanges of words, and the triumphant major chords of the 'Marseillaise', while Rick and Renault walk off into the fog and the camera pulls away upwards.

My provisional analysis does not rule out other, perhaps more interesting or speculative interpretations or related idiosyncratic affective responses that might develop in some viewers after repeated viewings or from an analytical perspective (e.g., as in theses 5 to 7). However, I consider the interplay of other affective cues and responses to be more important, especially for first-time viewers. These include:

- the overall melancholic-harmonic mood at the sensory and perceptual level;
- curiosity about the characters and their development;
- the empathetic approach to the characters' feelings, which are conveyed through their voices and facial expressions, among other things;
- the affective charging of situations through sentimental feelings of affection, accompanied by visual, linguistic, and musical leitmotifs;
- the activation of emotional memories of personal experiences of separation, which can be associated with tenderness, nostalgia, and sadness;
- the moral and non-moral appraisal of Rick and Ilsa and the sympathetic connection with their development in the course of the film, which adds recognition, acceptance, and hope to the sadness;
- the relief and morally satisfying resolution of suspense and curiosity at the end of the film; as well as
- reactions to the larger thematic statements of the film (e.g., 'Moral integrity is most important', 'We must fight for freedom and make sacrifices').

Casablanca's lasting success and the statements of many viewers indicate that the themes and aesthetics as well as the story were viewed positively, that the conflict 'love vs virtue' (Renault) moves many, and that the admiration for the filmmakers remains untainted. Of course, my analysis only deals with a small—albeit important—part of the film and its affect structure. Other factors, such as the performance and star images of Bogart and Bergman, the memorable, quotable dialogues, or the knowledge of the political function of film in the fight against the Nazis also play important roles. Being involved with the characters on the level of the storyworld, as well as reacting to their aesthetic and formal qualities (as artefacts), allowing ourselves to be moved by their indirect meanings (as symbols) and reflecting on their possible effects (as symptoms), make up essential parts of the complex affective impact of what is probably the most famous film classic in the world.

14.7 Guidelines for Analysis: Questions on Affective Involvement with Characters

1. What affective reactions to the characters is the analysis concerned with: intended, ideal or empirical reactions of viewers in the present, past or future? Which affective dispositions of the relevant viewer groups underlie the reactions (e.g., regarding moral and non-moral norms, sexual orientation, political positioning, intergroup relationships)?
2. What is the general relationship between the characters' affects and the viewers' affects throughout the film? Are the characters' and viewers' affects largely congruent, as is often the case in melodramas, or do they diverge widely, as is often the case in slapstick comedies?
3. How is the affective involvement with individual characters embedded in wider contexts, e.g., regarding character constellation, plot, style, reception situation? Are there strategies that steer viewer affects in different directions, e.g., with cheerful music to a brutal event?
4. Which dominant affects does the character evoke as a depicted being, as an artefact, as a symbol and as a symptom, and how are they related to each other and how do they interact with each other?
 - Do affective reactions (as is usually the case in mainstream film) focus on the character as a represented being in the storyworld? If so, are there scenes that deviate from this, e.g., through self-reflexivity?
 - What affects are triggered by the evaluation of the character as an artefact, for example regarding its successful or unsuccessful design through acting, staging, camera work, or script (dialogue)?
 - What affects does the character as a symbol invite through its contribution to the film's indirect meanings, overarching themes and statements? Can the audience connect the character's symbolism to their own lives, does its meaning concern their personal or social identity?
 - What emotions does the character evoke as a symptom, for example due to references to a star image, to certain real people or to certain target groups? Does the character address a fan culture? Does it evoke admiration or moral condemnation of its creators, concern for certain audience groups, or hope for positive effects as a role model?
5. How does the film create curiosity, mystery, and a desire to know more about the character, for instance, by their strange, unfamiliar appearance or behaviour, by suggesting their traumatic past, or by withholding relevant information?
6. Which affective cues of the represented being does the film emphasise? What physical, mental, and social traits and relationships? What motives, goals, needs,

external, and internal conflicts? Which physical, prosocial, or antisocial actions? What mental processes and bodily expressions? What appraisals do the highlighted features of the character invite? How does this change across the film?

7. What types of affective reactions does the character evoke, e.g., more subliminal, preconscious feelings or conscious, intense emotions?

- Are certain moods or sensations associated with the character at the level of perception, and if so, in what way, for example through leitmotif music?
- What conscious, object-orientated emotions does the character elicit? Are they primarily basic emotions such as joy, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust? Or more complex social and moral emotions such as *schadenfreude* or cringe?
- What long-term affective dispositions of sympathy, antipathy and empathy develop in relation to the characters, what tendencies to react positively or negatively to them in different situations? Do these dispositions change during the film and across the character's development?

8. Which forms of perspectival appraisal of the character and their situations are predominant in the film: intersubjective appraisal, subjective/group-specific appraisal, empathic feeling-with, taking sides in problem situations or activation of emotional memories and schemata?

9. What emotions arise in the intersubjective evaluation of the character? What combination of moral and non-moral intersubjective values is ascribed to it and how does this affect sympathy and empathy? What values does the character advocate or embody, what does it convey through its traits and behaviour, and how is it positioned in the value structure of the character constellation?

- What is the relationship between moral and non-moral values underlying the appraisal? Does the viewer tend to feel more moral emotions (such as respect, appreciation, indignation) or non-moral emotions (such as admiration for physical abilities, aesthetic elegance, or social power)?
- Is the character perceived by the audience at eye level or from a perspective of (physical, psychological, social) superiority or inferiority? What consequences does this have for the development of affects?
- How does the film shape the (moral) evaluation of the character through its narration and style?
- Does the character transgress a value system that is perceived as too rigid and is this experienced as liberating?

10. What affective responses arise from the subjective evaluation of the character according to the viewer's own, individual or group-specific interests?

- Which desires and longings does the character evoke in which viewers? Which physical, psychological, and social qualities trigger these desires? Does the character function as an erotic object, and if so, for whom (and for whom not)?
- Does the character activate innate schemas of danger, cuteness or mate choice or other entrenched patterns of behaviour that evoke feelings of threat, tender care, or sexual attraction?
- Does the character activate affective in-group or out-group stereotypes and prejudices?
- Does the character reactivate relationship experiences from the viewers' childhood?
- Does the character act as a mediator of knowledge for the audience? What pleasurable experiences of cognition and orientation does it convey?

11. What forms of empathy does the character evoke in what context?

- How strong are basic processes of somatic empathy, of affective contagion through bodily expressions and actions? Are there scenes in which the character triggers motor and affective mimicry through their physical and expressive behaviour?
- How similar is the perception and evaluation of situations by the character and the viewers, so that they focus on the same stimuli and react in congruent ways to them, sometimes also sharing the same desires and goals (situational empathy)?
- To what extent do viewers project their own moods and feelings, triggered by extradiegetic film elements such as music or voice-over, onto the character?
- Are there scenes of empathy or other narrative techniques that lead to imaginative empathy, simulation of the character's perspective and intense emotional identification?

12. What forms does affective siding for or against the characters in conflicts and interactions take? For and against which characters do the viewers take sides, and why?

- What interests and needs of the characters are at stake, and to what extent do the viewers react to these interests?
- How does the siding with characters develop over the course of the film in the form of longer episodes of sympathy, suspense, surprise, or curiosity?

13. Do the viewer's affective reactions correspond to certain typical patterns in film culture, such as the prototypical affective structure of mainstream movies, arthouse cinema, or other particular genres?

PART VIII: A SUMMARY AND A CASE STUDY



Fig. 54 The character configuration in Polanski's drama/thriller *Death and the Maiden*, based on the theatre play of the same name by Ariel Dorfman. (Dir. Roman Polanski, *Death and the Maiden*, 1994, Capitol Films/Channel Four Films, USA/UK/France. All rights reserved.)

Part VIII

Part VIII of this book summarises its key findings in two complementary ways: Chapter 15 provides an overview of the central concepts, theoretical findings, and analytical tools. Chapter 16 applies these means of analysis to a specific, particularly challenging and controversial example: Roman Polanski's *Death and the Maiden*.

15. Summary: Fundamentals of Character Theory and Analysis

This book began with the observation that characters are omnipresent and have an immense influence on life in today's media societies. There are many reasons to take a closer look at them. Filmmakers and other creators want to make them more interesting or effective; pundits and enthusiasts want to understand them better or experience them more intensely; cultural critics and activists discuss their social causes or consequences. In everyday life, in professional circles and in the public, debates about characters are constantly erupting: about their discriminatory embodiment of social groups, their moral or religious significance, their artistic and aesthetic values, their complex or controversial meanings, or their successful or unsuccessful design and adaptation.

In all these cases, it is important to grasp characters perceptively and talk about them precisely. Subjective intuitions are often not enough for this. In order to understand characters in their depth and diversity, we also need more systematic approaches. These in turn depend on fundamental questions: What are characters and how do they come about? What are their features and structures? What is their relationship to media and narrative environments? How are they perceived and experienced by their audiences? And how do they relate to culture and society? There are many competing answers to such questions, but so far no coherent and comprehensive theory. The main aim of this book was therefore to bring together key perspectives from different disciplines in order to find out how characters can be studied more thoroughly and deeply. The following summary of the findings provides a general orientation and can therefore also serve as a starting point for looking up the more detailed arguments and references in the previous chapters.

15.1 A Theoretical Basis and a Model for Analysis

What Are Characters and How Are They Experienced?

What characters are is already very controversial, as the first parts of this book have shown (especially Chapters 3, 5, and 6). Often, they are seen as imaginary humans,

but their spectrum also includes animals, aliens, monsters, robots, ghosts, gods, animated shapes, singing plants, talking toys, and any kinds of fantastic creatures. All these beings are distinguished from inanimate elements of represented worlds, such as refrigerators or mountains, by their inner lives, their perceptions, thoughts, motives, feelings, and other experiences ascribed to them. These inner lives can remain rudimentary (Punch or Lassie do not have particularly differentiated psyches) but must be represented or suggested in some form or other.

The mode of existence of such depicted beings, especially fictional ones, is viewed very differently and discussed controversially by scholars in philosophy, psychology, film, literature, and media studies (Chapters 2, 3). Most theories regard characters either as sign constellations or as mental representations. Such views have practical consequences; they determine how characters are analysed. Hermeneutic interpreters, for example, tend to focus on characters' psyche or cultural meaning, while (neo-)formalists rather concentrate on their textual design. However, most competing approaches can be related to each other if films and other media texts are understood as tools in communicative games of imagination in which the participants create worlds and beings together. Like laws or scientific theories, these collectively imagined worlds and beings are sophisticated artefacts that emerge from social practices of communication.

Among other things, this means that characters are formed on the basis of creators' and audiences' experiences in real life, but can be perceived to varying degrees as corresponding to or deviating from reality. In both fictional and non-fictional media texts, characters are co-created through imagination and communication, albeit according to different rules. The basic rule for fictional texts is: 'Imagine ... but don't believe that everything is true', so that even historical figures such as Napoleon or Phoolan Devi are separated from reality in them. Fiction thus enables an especially broad range of dramatic intensification, idealised exaggeration, escapist flight, nightmarish counter-reality, or defamiliarising estrangement. In contrast, the characters or 'media personae' of documentary film and other non-fictional media are associated with claims to true and truthful representation and concrete correspondences with reality (claims that are often not fulfilled, but still exist and can have legal consequences). Nevertheless, non-fictional characters too are communicative artefacts, products of collective imagination, and should not be confused with the real people they are based on. Sometimes, the fictional or non-fictional status of characters and their relation to reality may also be ambiguous or controversial, as in the case of the gods or saints in religious texts. This book focuses predominantly on fictional characters in film, and I am aware that non-fictional characters as well as characters in other media would require a more in-depth examination. However, the fundamental similarity of their ontology and genesis suggests that most findings of this book can also be applied to them (see, for example, the analysis of *Yellow Fever* in Chapter 4).

So, my general proposal is to understand characters as *recognisable represented beings with an inner life that exist as communicatively constructed artefacts* (and thus as

abstract objects in the sense of philosophical metaphysics; see Chapter 3). In the case of film characters, all their properties are attributed to them in the communicative processes of making and experiencing films. Filmmakers create and viewers process the signs and cues of the film, supplementing explicitly given information with their own knowledge, experience, and imagination to form vivid mental models of depicted beings. Nevertheless, characters are neither signs 'in the text' nor mental representations 'in the head', but collective constructs with a normative component. The individual character models of filmmakers and viewers resemble each other because they are formed on the basis of partly shared physical and psychological dispositions, including a shared knowledge of media and reality.

At the same time, the development of character models is not only based on such shared dispositions, but also on the rules and conventions of certain games of communication and imagination (such as Hollywood or Bollywood genres, or modes of arthouse cinema and documentary film). That characters have properties which are considered intersubjectively valid on the basis of communicative conventions is shown by the fact that we can argue about who understood a character better. Perhaps each of us has a different idea of one and the same character, but in meta-communication about characters we all assume that these ideas are not arbitrary. For example, anyone claiming that Rick Blaine is an alien or a Nazi spy would not be taken seriously. And any discussion about whether Rick and Ilsa really love each other presupposes that there are more or less correct views about this, which could be justified by recourse to the film and communicative rules.

Thus, characters are not purely subjective, but intersubjective. Nevertheless, their reception and mental representation are of decisive importance (Chapters 3, 5). Since characters are understood, remembered, loved or hated, they must be mentally represented in some way. Different philosophical, psychological, and semiotic theories regard the mental representations of characters as sign complexes, propositions, mental imagery, or patterns of neuronal activation. The approach with the greatest explanatory power, however, conceives of characters as being represented in the form of *mental models*. These models are multi-modal; they combine various forms of perception, imagination, and information—visual, acoustic, linguistic, etc.—into a vividly experienced whole, a gestalt. Mental models are dynamic, change over time, are present in consciousness during reception but can step back and be stored in memory. Character models represent the traits of a represented being with a certain structure, vividness, and perspective, which varies in different media, works, or scenes of one film. They are closely connected to other mental models that viewers have of the situations in the story or of themselves. When we watch *Casablanca*, for example, we form mental models of Rick, Ilsa, and the other characters, arrange them into situation models, and relate them to each other and often also to our self-models (for example by comparing oneself to Rick, Ilsa, or Sam). The structures and contexts of character models are therefore important in explaining how we react to characters or 'identify' with them.

The theoretical approach of mental modelling emphasises the mediality, constructivity, perspectivity, and fluidity of characters, which comes to the fore in numerous works: for example, when in animated films characters form fleetingly, only to immediately transform again or dissolve completely; when their artificiality is self-reflexively stressed (as with Daffy Duck in *Duck Amuck*); when in surrealism they exhibit absurd inconsistencies and inexplicable behaviour (as in *L'Age d'or*); when in mind-game films they turn out to be something different than previously assumed, sometimes even a mere hallucination (like Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*); when their ontological status within the storyworld—whether they are real, merely imagined or unreliably narrated—remains uncertain (like in *Last Year at Marienbad*). Such stylised, fragmented, metamorphic, or metaleptic characters often point to further levels of meaning.

The formation of mental character models is a prerequisite for the genesis of characters, but it is by no means the only aspect of their reception. Rather, it is at the core of several interrelated levels of character-centred reception processes (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 4):

1. the sensory perception of material signs representing the character, such as moving images and sounds in a film (or letters in a book, static images in a comic);
2. the mental modelling of the represented being;
3. inferences about its higher-level meanings;
4. assumptions about its causes and consequences in reality; and
5. aesthetic reflection on its representation in the medium (regarding levels 1–4).

In the case of Rick Blaine in *Casablanca*, for example, we perceive actor's voices, moving images of Humphrey Bogart's body, and many further filmic signs, mostly in a preconscious way. We then process these sensory perceptions in several steps further to form a mental model of Rick. Among other things, we combine partial views of his moving body, various verbal statements about him, and conclusions about his inner life to create an overall idea of an interesting-looking cynic in existential crisis. This initial model deepens and changes dynamically over time until we leave the film with a final model of Rick that we can remember later. During the film, we can also make inferences about Rick's 'higher' symbolic or thematic meanings. For example, we may assume he represents the conflict between love and duty, or symbolises the importance of moral integrity. Moreover, we can think about Rick's causal relations to the filmmakers or to certain audiences, for example by asking ourselves what political intentions the filmmakers had with Rick, or what effects he had on college audiences in the 1950s. Last but not least, we can reflect on how Rick is presented through the film's forms and devices, such as Bogart's acting, camera work, or narrative structure.

Chapter 3 of this book shows that these levels of experience are consistent with both

everyday talk about characters and sophisticated theories of textual meaning. Each level involves specific cognitive and affective processes that can be analytically separated. However, these processes build on each other and are in constant interaction. When analysing characters, therefore, all levels of experiencing them should be considered, and it should be clear which ones the analysis focuses on and which ones are excluded. This is worth mentioning because many theories and studies tend to ignore certain levels, particularly the third and fourth.

A Heuristic Tool for Analysis: The Character Clock

To counter this tendency and encourage a more complete approach, a simplified heuristic for analytical practice can be derived from the theoretical basis: the Character Clock (see Chapter 4 and Diagram 34). According to this heuristic model, characters have four aspects or dimensions. They can be analysed from an aesthetic, mimetic, semantic/thematic, and causal/communicative point of view, each of them focusing on specific questions:

1. **Artefact**—How is the character represented? Here, characters are considered in relation to the signs and structures of the media text. Texts evoke sensory and perceptual experiences (first level of reception), but later one can also consciously reflect on their formal qualities and aesthetic strategies and attribute general artefact qualities to the character, such as realism or complexity (fifth level) (Chapters 7, 8).
2. **Represented being**—What traits, relationships, and experiences does the character have in the storyworld? The answers are based on the formation of mental models and concern the character's body, mind, sociality, and behaviour (Chapters 5, 6).
3. **Symbol**—What does the character stand for, what higher-level meanings does it convey? 'Symbol' here refers to all forms of second-order meaning in which characters function as signs for something else, such as an overarching theme or message (Chapter 11).
4. **Symptom**—What are the causes and effects of the character in extratextual reality? Here the characters are considered as having or indicating certain causes and effects in communicative and social reality, for example as results of filmmakers' intentions or as behavioural models for the audience (Chapter 12).

We are therefore not only dealing with a 'twofoldness' of characters as represented beings and artefacts (Smith 2011), but actually with a 'fourfoldness'. When watching and analysing films, attention may switch between these four aspects of characters, focus on one or more of them, and connect some of them. When watching *Casablanca*, viewers may primarily perceive Rick as a casino owner in love, but occasionally also

admire Bogart's acting, understand Rick as a symbol of the USA, or question the idea of masculinity that he embodies. When they think about him later, they may further elaborate their model of the represented being (for example, regarding Rick's psyche) or focus more on the character's qualities as artefact, symbol, or symptom. For some characters, the latter aspects may already be foregrounded from the start. For example, sometimes characters are portrayed in such striking ways that we pay more attention to their design as artefacts than to their traits as beings in the storyworld. Or we have already read in a review that certain characters affirm discriminatory stereotypes, which pushes their symptomatic dimension into the foreground. In all four dimensions, individual characters are embedded into larger contexts, such as stylistic and representational conventions (Chapters 7 and 8), the narrative contexts of action, story and plot (Chapter 9), the character constellation (Chapter 10), as well as contexts of meaning, production, and culture (Chapters 11 and 12).

The heuristic model of the Character Clock largely corresponds to a broad range of existing theories from different disciplines, such as Roman Ingarden's multilevel structuring of literary works (1931), Erwin Panofsky's image analysis (1955), James Phelan's 'multichromatic' conception of literary characters (1989), Per Persson's stages of film reception (2003), as well as current psychological views of art perception (Pelowski et al. 2017). The model proposed in this book draws on some of these valuable approaches, but at the same time attempts to go beyond them by showing how they might be systematically related on the basis of more general theories of reception and meaning, as well as analyses of everyday talk about characters and art. Thereby, the Character Clock model aims to capture some basic distinctions that are lost in other approaches and to put various disciplinary perspectives on characters in connection to each other. For example, most cognitive theories focus on characters as represented beings and artefacts but tend to neglect their qualities as symbols and symptoms, which take centre stage in psychoanalytical approaches or cultural studies. The Character Clock makes such complementary emphases visible by providing an overview of the general dimensions of characters and their relations to different reception processes. It shows what kinds of properties can be attributed to characters, how these properties are connected, and what categories can be used to analyse and describe them.

The Character Clock model was developed with a focus on film, but it is fundamentally transmedial and can be applied to characters in different media. Of course, every medium shapes its characters in specific ways. The material, sensory, and semiotic qualities of different media, their technologies, organisations, practices, and conventions lead to media-specific forms and types of characters, and to different experiences and mental models of media users. In literature, for example, the inner life of characters is usually described directly through written language. Photography or painting, on the other hand, rely primarily on bodily expression in a single significant moment. Film, again, conveys the experiences of characters primarily through

moving images of external action as well as spoken language, sound, or music. In combination with other factors, all this may ultimately contribute to broad media-specific tendencies, such as a greater frequency of action-centred characters in film, interiority-centred characters in literature, symbolic characters in painting, or talkative characters on the stage.

However, such differences between media mostly concern the concrete manifestations and the frequency of certain characters rather than the general dimensions and categories of character analysis. Characters in all media can be analysed as represented beings, artefacts, symbols, and symptoms. Within these four dimensions, many more specific categories described in this book can also be applied to characters in different media to examine, for instance, their psyche and sociality, their higher meanings, or their social effects (see Diagram 34, external fields). There is one important exception, one crucial difference, that concerns mostly Chapter 7 in this book: the design of characters as artefacts (and thus their phenomenological experience) will differ significantly from medium to medium, especially regarding the concrete means of representation. The analysis of cinematic devices (such as acting, camera work, sound design, editing) would therefore have to be replaced by the analysis of the specific means of other media, such as single-frame sequences in comics, or musical stage performances in opera. This in turn affects other aspects of the artefact dimension, such as narrative structures typical of certain media. A further limitation of the heuristic model in this book concerns the analysis of characters in interactive media, such as avatars in computer games, as well as transmedia characters. Jan-Noël Thon, Felix Schröter, and others have made interesting suggestions as to how the model could be further developed in this respect (see Chapter 2). With suitable additions, it could also provide a basis for media-comparative analyses of characters, but this goes beyond this book.

In the practice of analysing, interpreting, and evaluating characters, the Character Clock model can be used flexibly. In the previous chapters it has been applied to analyse characters in very different types of films, such as Hollywood movies (*Casablanca*, *Imitation of Life*), European auteur films (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*), non-fictional animated essay films (*Yellow Fever*), and many other works. Later in this summary I will say a little more about how the model can be used in analytical practice, and at the end its suitability will be tested through a challenging case study, Roman Polanski's *Death and the Maiden*. But before that, let's look again at some more nuanced analytical categories in each of the four general dimensions of the Character Clock (see Diagram 34, external fields).

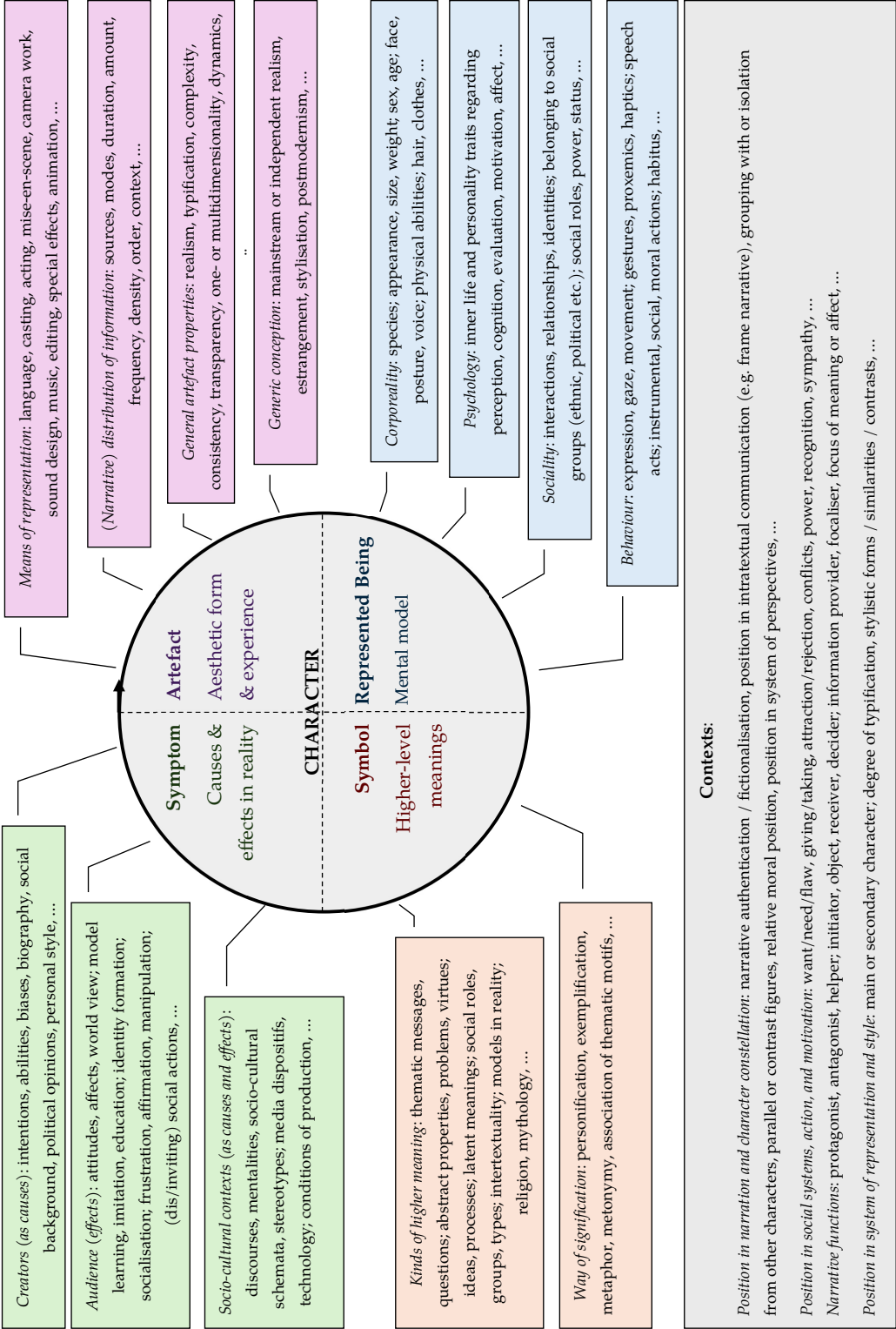


Diagram 34 The Character Clock and its central categories

15.2 How Can Characters Be Understood in Their Different Dimensions? A Conceptual Toolbox

Characters as Represented Beings

When analysing characters, it often makes sense to start with their traits as thinking, feeling and acting beings in a storyworld (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 6). This is their defining core and, in most cases, the central aspect of experiencing them. Even if some characters appear to be intuitively and instantly accessible in this respect, it is never easy to describe represented beings in a differentiated and convincing way. To do this, precise expressions must be found for subtle, complex qualities that are often only grasped through unreflective perception, or are inferred through imagination and interpretation.

Recourse to interdisciplinary studies of humans and other beings in reality can help here. Of course, it would be naive to equate characters with real persons; our approach to both is fundamentally different. We cannot physically and socially interact with characters as we do with persons, and we do not view persons as communicative artefacts, symbols, or symptoms shaped by media texts (at least not in the same way as characters). Moreover, characters can take on forms that are very different from real people or animals and enable counterfactual thought experiments, hybridisations of the human and the non-human, or experiences of alterity that transcend reality. However, as our development of mental character models is to a large part based on everyday experiences with extratextual reality, many useful concepts from disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, ethnology, or biology (including their reconstructions of common folk-theories) can still be used to perceive and describe characters in more differentiated ways. In doing so, it is important to reflect on the extent to which such concepts fit the analytical question, the characters and works to be examined, and the cultural context within which they were created or experienced (e.g., does it make sense to use concepts from psychoanalysis or behaviourism to describe a character's psyche?).

On this basis, the following system of categories for analysing represented beings can be proposed (Chapter 6). It is anthropocentric, but with some modifications it can also be applied to non-human characters (animals, monsters, robots, aliens). Based on common distinctions in philosophy, narrative theory, and everyday life, we can most generally distinguish between three broad areas of properties that both real and represented beings exhibit:

- their physicality (or corporeality);
- their psyche (or mind, interiority); and
- their sociality.

Of course, the distinction between these areas is again a heuristic simplification, as they are by no means strictly separated, but rather entangled with each other. They overlap and come together, particularly in behaviour, but can still be analytically distinguished and related to each other. Their distinction may seem almost banal, but it can help a lot in not becoming blind to important features of the character and overlooking them simply because they seem self-evident or are overshadowed by more striking features.

When analysing represented beings, it is therefore often useful to start with asking what their most important physical, mental, social, and behavioural traits are. In each of these areas, more specific categories can then be used for more detailed analysis (see Diagram 34, bottom right). They can help to be more attentive to subtle but significant nuances of the character and to avoid missing relevant features.

To analyse the *physicality* of characters, we can go beyond everyday talk by drawing on interdisciplinary studies of human (or animal) bodies. Psychological, sociological, and linguistic research on nonverbal communication is particularly useful as it allows for a more accurate perception and description of characters' appearance and performance, such as their body shape, face, gaze, voice, expressions, posture, gestures, kinesics, proxemics, haptics, body-related accessories and styles (such as clothing or hairstyle). Such categories sharpen the eye for what is otherwise often only subliminally perceived, such as Rick Blaine's larger-than-average, expressive face, the efficiency of his movements or his alternately absent, controlling, and wistful gaze. Particularly significant in the area of physicality, as in the other property fields, are characteristics that are linked to widespread norms and ideals, such as physical beauty, strength, or agility. In this context, for example, it can be noted that blockbusters focus on such characteristics, or that *Casablanca* blends out people with visible disabilities.

Often, external physical features of the characters already point to mental or social properties. The *sociality* of characters can be analysed in more detail by using concepts from cultural studies and social sciences. Categories from sociology and social psychology are particularly helpful to describe characters' social identities, interactions, relationships, roles, positions of power and belonging to certain groups (for example, regarding gender, partnership, friendship, family, profession, class, ethnicity, nationality, politics, or religion, as well as their various intersections). Sociology has imported some crucial concepts (such as the social role) from the arts, and they can now be re-imported in a refined form. The characters' positions in social power structures and intergroup conflicts are particularly relevant. Rick, for example, is at first characterised primarily as a middle-aged white American man in exile, who holds a self-sufficient position of power and high status in *Casablanca* through his role as a casino owner and his skilful manoeuvring between conflicting groups. He initially organises his social ties according to pragmatic-egoistic criteria and tries to stay out of the conflict between Nazis, Vichy French, and refugees. But eventually, he assumes moral responsibility, sacrifices his love, gains a friendship and decides to join the Resistance, thereby becoming part of a new group and assuming a new social identity.

To analyse the *psyche*—the inner life and personality—of characters, one can generally start with their traits and experiences regarding the basic mental faculties of humans and other animals: perception, cognition, evaluation, motivation, and emotion. In our example, Rick's thoughts and feelings mainly revolve around Ilsa and himself, he recaptures lost values, and his emotional and motivational development progresses from bitterness to longing to serious determination. More detailed analyses of characters' minds can draw on various approaches, in particular reconstructions of folk psychology, historically and culturally specific ideas of the mental, and various current theories such as psychoanalysis, personality psychology or cognitive science. Again, such approaches can provide more nuanced descriptions of represented beings, but they can also lead to widely divergent analyses and interpretations. Rick's personality traits, for example, could be described according to the leading psychological model of the Big Five factors: extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. At the beginning of the film, we could describe him as introverted, conscientious, difficult to get along with, emotionally unstable, and not very open. However, based on psychoanalysis, we would come to very different conclusions by focusing on Rick's unconscious, his repressed desires, inner conflicts, neuroses, childhood experiences or object attachments (which are each interpreted differently by diverse psychoanalytic schools). For example, some authors have described Rick as an Oedipal character.

Choosing between such competing conceptualisations of physicality, psyche, and sociality depends on several criteria. One of them is the aim of the analysis: Is it about how past, present or future audiences perceive and experience Rick? Or is it about how the filmmakers intended Rick to be experienced? Or is it about determining what an 'ideal' perception of Rick would be like, one that is particularly inspiring or corresponds to optimal communication? Another criterion concerns which features of the character are unclear or controversial in the first place. In most cases, there is widespread agreement about physicality and clearly signalled social positions—nobody will doubt that Rick is a dark-haired café owner. Differing interpretations mostly concern imperceptible aspects of inner life or complex nuances of social behaviour. For example, do Rick and Ilsa really love each other? And did they sleep together, even if it is not shown in the film? Answers to such questions require interpretation and justification. Ultimately, they are based on assumptions about dispositions of the empirical, intended or ideal audience. These include dispositions that also guide the perception of real people (e.g., folk psychology or social stereotypes), but also knowledge about media and communication (e.g., genres or character types). Since such dispositions range from innate reaction tendencies to culturally shaped affect structures to individual memories, they have varying degrees of intersubjective similarity and validity. Reflecting on how the aims of the analysis relate to such audience dispositions can help to choose and justify certain approaches to characters' bodies, minds, and social lives, and thus substantiate their interpretation.

However, when we examine characters' physicality, psyche, and sociality, we do not only refer to the storyworld level. Although their psyche and sociality are revealed to a large extent through their externally perceptible features (appearance, behaviour, speech, or surroundings), information from outside the storyworld, such as a voice-over, extradiegetic music, visual styles, or perceived plot functions, also contribute to their characterisation. For example, the casting of Bogart and Bergman already signals that Rick and Ilsa will continue their affair, and what they feel when they say goodbye is suggested by the musical leitmotif 'As Time Goes By'. The above categories thus help to describe the traits of represented beings, but are not sufficient to explain how these beings and traits emerge. For this, characters must also be considered as artefacts.

Characters as Artefacts

The basic question when examining characters as artefacts is how they are given certain aesthetic forms by media means and textual techniques. We can analyse the formal qualities of characters on four levels of increasing abstraction (see Diagram 34, top right). The first two levels concern the mode of representation (Chapter 7):

- media-specific means shape the sensory-semiotic cues that guide our encounters with characters, and
- these cues are distributed across narrative, rhetorical, or other textual structures.

The other two aspects concern the results of these modes of representation (Chapter 8):

- characters are ascribed general artefact qualities (e.g., complexity), and
- they correspond to (or diverge from) overarching, conventional character conceptions of media genres or cultures.

In film, a variety of cinematic devices shapes the flow of images and sounds that present characters to the viewer into a concrete, sensual form: casting, acting, staging, mise-en-scene, camera work, sound, music, and editing contribute to this. Such categories of film production help describe the sensory presence of characters, their phenomenal experience that is otherwise difficult to grasp. For example, if we say that Bogart's face is shown in slightly low-angle close-ups and first given little, then more fill light, this explains how visual experiences are evoked that make Rick appear as 'close', 'tall', 'dark and hard at first, later a little softer'. If *Casablanca* were a novel or a comic, its characters would be presented through other, linguistic or visual means such as word choice or drawing styles, with correspondingly different sensual-aesthetic effects. To examine this in more detail, we could draw on a wealth of art and media studies. The analysis of the means of characterisation breaks down the character as an artefact into many partial aspects, such as Bogart's acting, Curtiz's staging, or Edeson's camera. These partial aspects combine to form certain patterns and media-, author-, or work-specific styles of characterisation.

On a more abstract level above concrete media devices and techniques, characters are shaped by narrative, rhetorical, or other overarching text structures. All signs or cues that trigger processes of character reception can be regarded as character-related information. This information is structured in specific ways, guiding the formation of mental models and other cognitive and affective processes, such as curiosity, suspense or surprise. Information about characters can have different functions, relevance, modality, immediacy, and reliability, and can be conveyed by different means and perspectives. For example, it makes a difference whether a characterisation comes from a reliable or unreliable narrator, or that the act of love between Ilsa and Rick is only vaguely suggested and not directly shown. In addition to these modes of character information, it is also important how this information is arranged in the text, that is, in which order, frequency, duration, quantity, density, and context, and whether it is redundant, complementary, or discrepant.

The use of such structural categories makes it possible to differentiate between various forms and developments of character models. Films can facilitate, complicate or even completely block the formation of consistent models. Many protagonists are introduced right at the beginning in condensed portraits. In other cases—as with Rick—their exposition is stretched out. Some characters only become comprehensible at the end of a work, others remain enigmatic even then. Information about characters is often bundled into particularly significant phases of characterisation. In addition to the exposition and the ending, these include extended dialogues, plot climaxes, scenes of decision or empathy, of crisis and change, sequences with typical or conspicuous behaviour, or scenes that vividly present the character's mental experiences. In such significant phases, both the audience's character models and the depicted beings in the storyworld themselves can change. Both kinds of changes need not necessarily go hand in hand, so characters may appear different to the audience than they actually are in the storyworld, which is often used for narrative effects. For example, for a while you may fear that Rick will actually hand Victor Laszlo over to the Nazis, whereas in reality he plans to save him.

Cinematic devices and narrative techniques make viewers form mental character models with a certain structure. Building on this, we attribute broader *artefact qualities* to characters, such as realism, stereotypicity, complexity, consistency, transparency, multidimensionality, dynamism, and their counterparts (Chapter 8). Such terms refer, on the one hand, to how the character model is internally structured, for example, whether the traits represented in it fit together (consistency). Moreover, artefact qualities indicate how the character model relates to other mental representations of the audience—for example, the extent to which it corresponds to common ideas of reality, cultural ideals, or narrative stereotypes (realism, idealisation, typification). For instance, Rick was considered idealised because he is so extremely cool and willing to make sacrifices. And that Ilsa initially acts courageously, strongly and independently, but then hands over all decisions to Rick, may be seen as psychologically inconsistent, or as conforming to gender stereotypes. This also reveals

a double meaning of speaking about the 'multidimensionality' of characters: on the one hand, multidimensionality can be understood as the roundedness of depicted beings with a rich set of traits, and on the other as the general fourfold nature of characters as artefacts, depicted beings, symbols, and symptoms.

If certain combinations of artefact qualities are repeated in many characters over time, they can congeal into *character conceptions*, cultural conventions of creating and experiencing characters (comparable to genres, and often related to them). Character conceptions can influence both aesthetic judgement and cultural images of human nature. According to the conception of mainstream realism, prevailing in Hollywood and other popular narratives, protagonists are supposed to be individualised, multidimensional, consistent, easy to understand, psychologically transparent, dynamic, autonomous, and dramatic. Mainstream films and novels thus suggest an image of humans as easily understandable, coherent, conscious, emotional, autonomous, active, morally straightforward beings. In contrast, characters in independent realism, as in Akerman's or Antonioni's works and many other arthouse films, are more opaque, ambivalent, complex, and difficult to understand, less consistent and less dramatic, more static and more passive. The result is a different image of humans as fundamentally incomprehensible, morally ambiguous, emotionally diffuse, driven by unconscious motives, at the mercy of external and internal constraints, and inherently contradictory. Further character conceptions, for example in postmodern, surrealist, or experimental works, differ from both types of realism in that they stylise, alienate, fragment, or even dissolve the characters, thereby emphasising their dimensions as artefacts or symbols in the audience's experience.

Characters can thus be analysed as artefacts by examining the media-specific means of their presentation, the structure of the textual information about them, the constellation of their general artefact qualities, and their relation to existing character conceptions in media culture. For example, although *Casablanca* provides information that places Rick Blaine as the protagonist at the centre, it leaves his motivation and true personality largely in the dark for a long time, thus fostering curiosity and suspense. Rick's characterisation involves seemingly contradictory cues: everyone respects, admires or desires him, although he remains cold and, by his own words, 'sticks his neck out for nobody'. Such apparent contradictions are resolved by Bogart's star image and acting style, which, in a blend of realism and idealisation, emphasise Rick's deep hurt and signal his future transformation. All that contributes to making Rick an individualised, multidimensional and dynamic character. However, due to his passivity and opacity throughout much of the film, Rick does not fully conform to Hollywood's convention of mainstream realism, but in some respects appears closer to independent realism. Of course, one could go into much more detail and describe subtle strategies that shape our experience of the characters in certain scenes, such as when Rick's delayed exposition plays on the desire to finally see his face. Such analyses always rely on (mostly implicit) assumptions about reception, about how the artwork evokes certain experiences, as well as about a character's contexts.

Characters and Their Contexts

In all their dimensions, characters are embedded in various narrative, aesthetic, semantic, and practical contexts: as represented beings in the film's storyworld, as artefacts in its textual structures, as symbols in its higher meanings, and as symptoms in the sociocultural contexts of production and reception. Two narrative contexts are especially important in analysis: plot and character constellation (see Diagram 34, bottom).

An essential link between characters, story, and plot is the *motivation* of their actions (see Chapter 9). Most stories and their narrative organisation in plots revolve around the actions of characters, and when characters act, certain motives are attributed to them that can evoke interest, curiosity, suspense, and surprise. When Rick insults Ilsa, we may assume that he wants to take revenge on her. Conversely, we can also already know a character's motives and therefore expect them to carry out certain actions. We know that Rick still loves Ilsa and wonder what he will do to win her back. Inferences from known motives to future actions can create suspense; inferences from actions to underlying motives can create curiosity, understanding, perspective-taking, or empathy.

The characters' central motives form the core of their personality, and their development—such as Rick's change from selfishness to renunciation—is an important basis for a narrative's overarching themes and affective involvement. In analysing motivation, we can draw primarily on psychology, philosophy, literary studies, but also on screenwriting guides. Among other things, they help to distinguish between different kinds and levels of characters' motives, from general needs to more concrete values and wishes to specific goals and plans. Such types of motives have different effects on the narrative, its themes and the audience's experience. For example, stories can focus on different levels of needs, from the need to breathe (e.g., in horror films) to social needs like love (in melodramas) to the need for transcendence (in spiritual films). Crucial to most stories are the characters' social motives, which range between egoism and altruism and are often related to social groups and roles.

Characters' motives also give rise to the driving force of most narratives: conflict. Narrative conflict patterns range from the inner struggle of individuals to interpersonal confrontations, to arguments in love triangles, to larger groups clashing. Characters come into external conflict with each other when their goals are incompatible: Ilsa needs the travel visas, but Rick doesn't want to give them to her. Many characters have several motives at the same time, which leads to internal conflicts. Ilsa is torn between her role as Victor's wife and Rick's lover; she behaves altruistically and renounces her own desires in order to protect her husband. Screenwriting guides recommend that characters have a concrete external goal ('want'), a real inner need, and a key flaw, all of which can come into conflict with each other. This inner conflict develops over the course of the plot and often only becomes apparent gradually. When Rick refuses Ilsa and her husband the vital visa, it is initially unclear why he is doing this. Does he

want to win Ilsa back, take revenge on her, humiliate her or force an explanation from her? All these possibilities of external motivation remain open, but they all contradict Rick's inner need to reconcile with Ilsa and restore his integrity. This need is initially opposed by his central flaw of selfishness and bitterness, which he overcomes in the course of the film.

Driven by their motives, the characters meet and interact with each other in changing *scenic constellations* that follow each other in the plot: Rick and Ugarte; Rick and Renault; Rick, Ilsa, and Laszlo. On a more general level, each character occupies a specific position within the *character constellation*, the overall system of all the characters and their relationships in a certain artwork (Chapter 10). In film, such systems range from one-person plays to ensemble films with dozens of characters. The structure of the character constellation is formed by the network of manifold relationships that exist between the characters both as represented beings and as artefacts. The individual characters are situated in networks of hierarchy, interaction, communication, values, narrative functions, similarities and contrasts, attraction and rejection, power and recognition, conflict and support. As major or minor characters, they occupy positions in a hierarchy of attention; as narrators and narratees in communication; as represented beings in a social system; as protagonists or antagonists in interactions and conflicts; as heroes or villains in a value structure; as parallel or contrasting characters in diegetic, stylistic, or thematic patterns.

How the characters are positioned in this constellation contributes significantly to their characterisation, narrative meaning, and audience involvement. As a rule, characters are perceived in comparison to each other, which emphasises certain traits and developments. The submissive, talkative Ugarte emphasises Rick's self-sufficient, laconic nature; the idealistic Laszlo is the touchstone for Rick's moral development. The way in which value-laden traits, such as moral qualities or physical attractiveness, are distributed across the characters in a constellation results in a value structure that affects the appraisal of the individual characters. In *Casablanca*, the range between good (Laszlo) and evil (Strasser) is wide. Rick rises from the middle of the moral spectrum to its positive extreme until he surpasses Laszlo not only in power, humour and attractiveness as before, but also in morality. In films noirs, on the other hand, often all the characters are more or less flawed, and the viewers tend to orient themselves towards those characters who behave the least immorally.

However, the character constellation is not only a moral and social system, but also a narrative and aesthetic system in which the characters fulfil certain *functions as artefacts*. They contribute to the development of the plot and its conflicts by performing narrative roles: as protagonist, antagonist or their helpers, as initiator of the plot, its target object, recipient, or decider. They offer a narrative perspective on the events, provide information, reinforce realism effects, convey superordinate meanings, establish intertextual references, or possess intrinsic aesthetic or affective value. The attention we pay to them as main or secondary characters depends, among other

things, on the density and significance of such functions. Since protagonists and antagonists drive the plot forward, they generally occupy a prominent position in the hierarchy of attention.

Characters are also related to each other through similarities and contrasts of their diegetic and formal properties. Thereby they can be grouped or isolated in the constellation, often with sociocultural consequences. Characters from marginalised social groups are frequently forced into the function of antagonists or helpers, stereotyped, and portrayed in aesthetically unfavourable ways. *Casablanca* is not free of this either: the relationship between the main character Rick and the secondary character Sam is friendly but unequal, and Moroccans only appear in tiny roles as usual suspects or fraudulent dealers.

The various forms and functions of character constellations have hardly been researched to date, although they could offer essential starting points for analysing and criticising narratives from aesthetic, ideological, or political perspectives (for instance, many political narratives feature a constellation of perpetrators, victims, and heroes or helpers). The complex structure of character constellations has a broad range of narrative, aesthetic, and sociocultural effects. This concerns also the characters' symbolic and symptomatic qualities.

Characters as Symbols and Symptoms

'Symbol' and 'symptom' are used in this book as umbrella terms to capture the various complex relationships of characters to higher-level meanings and sociocultural realities (Diagram 34, left-hand side). As symbols, characters contribute to indirect or superordinate meanings that go beyond the storyworld, such as the themes of an artwork (Chapter 11). As symptoms, characters point to causal factors that shaped them in sociocultural reality (e.g., in media production), as well as actual effects they may have on audiences or societies (Chapter 12). Because their study as both symbols and symptoms usually involves numerous contested presuppositions, it is often referred to as interpretation and distinguished from their more basic analysis as represented beings and artefacts. Interpreting characters is considered complex and controversial, and different emphases are placed on it. In everyday life, media users often interpret characters quite freely and casually; the classical hermeneutics of art, literature, and religion are dedicated to detailed symbolic interpretation; sociocultural criticism or psychoanalytical approaches, again, focus more on characters as symptoms; and some structuralist or neo-formalist media studies take a critical stance towards both. Moreover, there are media differences: characters in literature, theatre or painting tend to be more often considered as meaningful, culturally valuable symbols, while characters in film, comics, and other popular art forms are more often critically discussed as revealing or potentially dangerous symptoms. Such different attitudes towards the interpretation of characters as symbols and symptoms can be related to

each other on the basis of a descriptive, meta-theoretical approach that starts from how characters are experienced in reception.

Accordingly, the study of characters as symbols is about exploring what higher-level meanings audiences can derive from the characters, based on prior knowledge, textual cues, and mental models (Chapter 11). On this basis, viewers can associate various types of higher meanings with a character's features, such as references to virtues and vices, repressed desires, abstract facts, social groups, historical persons, or mythical figures. For example, interpreters have claimed that Rick embodies a certain personality type or masculinity ideal; that he stands for the American people or President Roosevelt; or that his moral development reflects US foreign policy during the Second World War. Moreover, Rick has been understood to represent thematic messages such as 'the preservation of moral integrity is worth great sacrifice'. The association of the character with such ideas can arise in various ways, e.g., by generalising their traits so that they stand for a social group or humanity as a whole; by identifying their similarities and analogies with elusive processes such as love or death; or through their metaphorical or metonymic connections with semantic fields of all kinds. The characters in question thus become personifications, allegories, exemplars, or representatives of a theme. Some films explicitly call for such a search for higher meanings, for example many auteur films or animated films. But the symbolic and thematic meanings of characters are also important in mainstream live-action movies, as the example of *Casablanca* shows. The aim of entertaining an audience excludes neither deeper meanings nor propaganda messages.

This already points to the symptomatic properties of characters, their perceived causes and effects in extratextual reality (Chapter 12). The generic term 'symptom' refers to the dimension of characters as sociocultural indicators or factors, and thus also as causal links between production and reception.¹ Once we have a rough idea of a character as a represented being, artefact, or symbol (and this can happen even before the film, for example through advertising), we can ask ourselves why the character was created like this, and what effects this might have on the audience or society.

When we look at the *causes* of characters, we can see them as indicators that point to very different factors of their emergence in communicative environments and sociocultural reality. Following Critical Discourse Analysis and other approaches, we can locate these causal factors at micro, meso, and macro levels. They include, for example, the motives of the individual creators involved (such as the members of a film team), the media dispositif (the structure of the medium as a constellation of technologies, organisations, professional roles and routines), as well as larger sociocultural contexts,

1 Because the symbolism and the symptomatology of characters can be closely linked, they are sometimes confused in the analysis. However, it is quite easy to distinguish between them (see Chapter 12): with the symbolic dimension of the character, the question is what higher meaning it conveys; with the symptomatic dimension, the question is why the character has this meaning and with what effect.

including discourses, ideologies, or inter-group relations. In the case of *Casablanca*, for example, we can speculate how the actor Bogart, the Hollywood studio system, or cultural ideas of masculinity contributed to shaping the character Rick.

With regard to the reception and impact side, inferences can be drawn about the *effects* of characters as behavioural models, deterrent examples, empathy trainers, identification figures, parasocial partners, fictitious friends, opinion leaders, or objects of fear, desire, and worship. This concerns, among other things, the use and discussion of characters in contexts of psychotherapy, humanitarian communication, education, advertising, professional training, political propaganda, ideology critique, youth protection, as well as media production, ethics, and regulation. Chapter 12 brings together a wide range of findings from interdisciplinary research on the question of how characters can have real effects, including observational learning, imitation, pleasurable vicarious experience, narrative persuasion, cultivation, identity formation, Entertainment-Education, (anti-)discrimination, as well as more direct forms of impact on real-life relationships and practices. Characters like Rick can invite imitation and spark learning processes, contribute to images of humanity, provide building blocks for the construction of individual identity, confirm or question the social status quo.

Accordingly, characters are also used purposefully in various practical contexts, for example in school education, vocational training, commercial advertising, religious rituals, political information or demagogic propaganda. In societies where freedom of opinion prevails and the rights of minorities are protected, many characters have positive effects as elements of art, socialisation, moral clarification, social self-understanding, and self-questioning. But characters can of course also contribute to problematic discourses and societal structures, as ideology criticism rightly emphasises. Violent protagonists are often the subject of public debate about possible copy-cat crimes (as in the case of *A Clockwork Orange*). But more important are the negative effects of discriminatory characters (such as the Black villains in *The Birth of a Nation*). The stereotyping of marginalised social groups is one of the main causes of characters' negative impact. As stereotyping concerns characters both as represented beings and as artefacts in the context of character constellations, it is addressed in several chapters of this book (particularly Chapters 6, 8, 10, and 11).

An essential aim of interpreting characters as symbols or symptoms is to justify or criticise evaluations of their meanings or their causes and effects. The fact that some theoretical approaches shy away from interpretation is problematic, as the four dimensions of characters all interact with each other. For example, if one recognises a profound meaning or a discriminatory stereotype in a character, this usually also influences how one perceives the character as a depicted being and as an artefact. It can draw attention to certain features of the character and change affective responses to them (as the example at the end of this book will show).

15.3 Experiencing Characters: Imaginative Closeness and Affective Involvement

The results summarised so far also have implications for the much-discussed question of how characters are experienced by their audiences. What forms of imaginative and affective involvement (or engagement) do they evoke, and in what ways? Obviously, characters can make us laugh, cry, marvel, tremble or rage, arouse curiosity or suspense, lust or disgust, admiration or hatred. Years later, we can still remember them with affection or trepidation. All of this is part of the psychological effects of characters, which in turn underlie their sociocultural impact. But how do such reactions arise and how can they be described and explained? Theories from various disciplines provide different answers to these questions. The most common approaches refer to 'identification', 'empathy', 'sympathy', 'moral evaluation', or 'parasocial interaction'.

However, one-dimensional explanations based on these concepts fall short, as Chapters 13 and 14 show. In contrast, affective involvement with characters is conceptualised in this book as *multidimensional, multilevel, perspectival appraisal of characters' features and situations*. Appraisal means an affective reaction to stimuli that are perceived as positive or negative, pleasant or unpleasant, attractive or aversive, which involves changes in bodily arousal. Such an appraisal is multidimensional because characters evoke affective responses in each of their dimensions: as represented beings, artefacts, symbols, and symptoms. It is multilevel because it is not limited to conscious judgements, but ranges from preconscious affects and moods to consciously experienced emotions to analytically reflected meta-emotions. And it is perspectival, because it always takes place from a certain perspective, shaped by the interplay of text structures and audience dispositions.

The affective multidimensionality of characters results from their fourfold nature and the corresponding levels of sensual-perceptual, cognitive, and imaginative reception: we perceive moving images or other material representations of characters, form mental models, associate higher meanings, and draw inferences about real causes and effects (Chapters 3 to 12). Each of these dimensions of experiencing characters involves specific kinds of affective responses. We can respond affectively to Bogart's acting, Rick's coolness, the meanings he conveys, the political intentions in his creation, and his presumed influence on other viewers. With different characters, works, genres, or media, different dimensions may dominate the audience's affective experience. There is countless evidence of responses to characters that go beyond their qualities as represented beings, for example in the enthusiasm of fans for star performances or intertextual connections of favourite characters, in the interpretive desire of connoisseurs to decipher deeper meanings of auteur film protagonists, in public outrage over racist or sexist stereotypes, in censors' concerns about moral influences of anti-heroes, or in the veneration of religious and political icons. The example at the end of this book will show how affective impulses from characters' different dimensions can also come into conflict with each other.

If Chapters 13 and 14 focus primarily on involvement with characters as represented beings, it is because this tends to dominate both the audience experience and the theoretical discussion and already requires considerable clarification. Research in psychology and neuroscience suggests that perceiving and modelling characters and their situations evokes affective appraisals on different levels of consciousness, shaped by structures of the human body, sociocultural influences, and individual experiences. The approach proposed here builds on that research, but in contrast to many other theories, particularly in media psychology, it emphasises the mediating role of imagination and perspectivity in responding to characters. Accordingly, affective appraisals of depicted beings and situations nearly always involve imagination and take place from a certain perspective, guided by the media text. In media studies, this is often treated under terms such as focalisation, filtering, or point of view, which emphasise relations either of (visual) perception or knowledge. However, this does not go far enough; perspectivity must be understood more comprehensively.

Chapter 13 has therefore argued that all responses to represented beings are shaped by a *system of imaginative closeness or distance* to them, which influences how we judge them, whether we like them, and whether we take sides for or against them (with implications for their sociocultural impact and ethical evaluation). Imaginative closeness or distance to characters has spatial, temporal, social, cognitive, and affective aspects that interact with each other and are guided by media texts to achieve certain effects. In film, for example, close-ups can give the impression of being spatially close to a character, and slow motion can synchronise us with a character's experience of time. Both spatial and temporal proximity have immediate bodily effects. Another, situational form of closeness arises when we experience events of the storyworld together with the characters, or when films direct our attention to the same objects and action possibilities on which the characters are also focused. Moreover, we can feel close to a character in the sense that we understand their psyche, their sociality and their situation well, because the film provides relevant information about them. In terms of social closeness, viewers can compare their own social position (as lovers, parents, workers, outsiders) with that of a character and gain the impression that they are familiar or similar to them. They can assign characters to their own in-groups or out-groups, project social desires onto them, or feel like they could interact with them. Finally, affective closeness to characters emerges when viewers develop strong, positive feelings for them or empathically share their emotions.

All of this can be guided by the film. Mainstream films usually aim to enhance the viewers' closeness to their protagonists in all aspects while keeping much greater distance to antagonists. In *Casablanca*, numerous techniques are used to bring the audience closer to Rick, such as close-ups of his face, approximations to his visual point of view, the narrative focus on his experiences, dialogues about his inner life, the flashback to his memories, or the suggestion of inner processes through mood music and mise-en-scene. Rick's narrative characterisation and his embodiment by

Humphrey Bogart reinforce the social closeness of male, middle-class, anti-fascist Americans to him, and his moral development and prosocial actions suggest positive appraisals and emotions. In contrast, some types of arthouse films create a far greater (Brechtian) distance to their protagonists.

The most important aspect of closeness to characters concerns the viewers' relationship to the characters' *mental perspective* on the storyworld, their way of experiencing its elements and situations through perception, cognition, evaluation, volition, and emotion. Both characters and viewers (and sometimes narrators) can be ascribed such a mental perspective, and through audiovisual and narrative techniques, films can bring their perspectives into specific relationships to each other. As a result, the way a viewer experiences the storyworld can be more or less close to the experience of a character in various ways, which are in principle independent of each other, including the perspectives of seeing, hearing, imagining, thinking, knowing, judging, wishing, and feeling. For example, a POV shot can bring us close to Rick's visual perception, while we don't share his knowledge or feelings: we may see Ilsa from a similar point of view as him, but while he is angry with her, we can know more than him and sympathise with both of them.

The system of mental perspectives establishes different ways of experiencing characters: viewers can react to them like distanced analysts, engaged observers, empathisers, or imaginary interaction partners. Sometimes viewers follow a character through the action like external observers, feeling for them in a way that is distinctly different from the characters' own feelings (this is often referred to as sympathy or antipathy). In other cases, viewers identify with a character by sharing their perspective in relevant ways (e.g., we may share Rick's goals at the end of *Casablanca*). More particularly, a relationship of empathy is created when film techniques make us feel with characters and develop affects that are similar to theirs (e.g., through contagious expressions or mood music). And if viewers have the impression that characters are directly addressing or attacking them (think of monsters pouncing out of the frame or protagonists talking into the camera), these are cases of parasocial interaction.

These different perspectives and attitudes towards the characters influence the way the audience reacts affectively to them (Chapter 14). Basically, films direct viewers' reactions by foregrounding certain features of the characters and their situations that act as affective elicitors and trigger appraisal processes. There are at least four basic forms:

- the appraisal of the characters themselves, which may be intersubjective or subjective/group-specific and
- the appraisal of the characters' situations, which may be empathetic (sharing the characters' feelings) or sympathetic/antipathetic (feeling differently from the characters).

Of course, this distinction is again a simplification, but it can help to better understand the range and interplay of various reactions to represented beings.

Accordingly, some appraisals focus on the characters themselves, their physical, mental and social traits and behaviours. In *intersubjective appraisal*, viewers react to characters' traits according to widely shared values and norms: Rick's altruistic motives may elicit the viewer's moral approval. Moral appraisal concerns pro- or antisocial motives and actions (giving and taking) and is especially important. But the audience may also respond to non-moral qualities such as intelligence, humour, status, or physical strength.

In *subjective appraisal*, on the other hand, viewers assess characters according to their own individual or group dispositions and react with self-orientated affects. For example, characters can trigger erotic desire or political outrage if the viewers perceive them as attractive to themselves or dangerous to their in-group. Intersubjective judgements tend to evoke converging audience reactions, while subjective judgements tend to evoke diverging reactions from audience groups who differ, for example, in their sexual orientation or political opinion. These tendencies have an impact on narrative strategies for creating characters. For example, it can be assumed that commercial mainstream films align the design of their characters with the presumed dispositions of the majority of their paying target audience, so that their positive protagonists predominantly correspond to the values and interests of that audience, are attractive to heterosexual viewers, and elude political categorisation.

While both intersubjective and subjective appraisal concentrate on the characters themselves, other appraisals focus on storyworld situations that involve or concern the characters. Depending on the degree of approximation to the characters' experience of the situation, such appraisals can be empathetic or rather sympathetic/antipathetic. *Empathetic appraisal* simulates the characters' mental perspective and experience of the situation and involves affects that are largely similar to theirs. This can be achieved through various means, such as somatic contagion through the character's expressions and bodily actions, foregrounding situational triggers and goals the character also focuses on, using music and other audiovisual means to create corresponding moods, or using narrative techniques that invite active imagination and perspective-taking. Empathetic appraisal can be fostered by the audience's desire for vicarious experience and by their social comparisons with the character ('ego-identification' or 'wish-identification').

Objective, subjective, and empathetic appraisal of characters form the basis for developing more permanent *dispositions of sympathy or antipathy* for them, taking sides for or against them in conflicts. This is the basis of sympathetic feelings for characters (or antipathetic feelings against them) in situations that affect their interests and wellbeing. We hope that Rick and Ilsa will get together, fear that there is no happy solution for them, and are satisfied when they are able to maintain their integrity (and Strasser gets what he deserves). Taking sides for protagonists or against antagonists usually develops, as in this case, across longer, increasingly intensive episodes. In most films, the imaginative and the affective involvement with protagonists unfolds dynamically, but with increasing closeness and intensity.

The diversity of affective involvement with depicted beings results from the various forms of their perspectival appraisal in combination with the variety of their potentially affective features, such as their emotional expressions, their physical, mental or social abilities, their group membership, power and status, their selfish or altruistic motives, their pro- or anti-social actions, their beauty, illness and death. At the same time, the affective appraisal of such storyworld features and situations is influenced by multiple contexts, including the experience of characters as artefacts, symbols, and symptoms. For example, their conspicuous artificiality, crude symbolism, or discriminatory purpose can negatively influence their appraisal as depicted beings.

The understanding of imaginative and affective involvement with characters proposed here constitutes a novel theoretical approach that differs significantly from the currently most influential theories of characters and affect/emotion. In contrast to most positions in cognitive media theory, it emphasises the multidimensionality of appraisal; in contrast to media psychology its imaginative perspectivity; in contrast to psychoanalysis its variable range between identificatory closeness and analytical distance. The advantages of such an approach lie in its ability to differentiate between diverse types of affective involvement, to explain otherwise incomprehensible film structures and systematically diverging audience reactions, and to capture reactions not only to likable mainstream movie protagonists or identification figures, but also to ambivalent anti-heroes, terrifying monsters, objects of erotic desire, minor characters, disturbing arthouse protagonists, or symbolic characters in animated and experimental films. Most existing theories do not take this affective complexity of characters into account, but limit themselves to selected aspects of responding to represented beings, such as identification, parasocial interaction, moral judgement, or bodily contagion. Ultimately, they are based on the assumption that all other possibilities of affective reactions to characters, as outlined in Chapters 13 and 14, play no role. This assumption seems so implausible to me that it should be better tested theoretically and empirically.

15.4 Limitations, Implications, and Applications of the Theory: The Variety of Characters

The general aim of the theoretical approach developed in this book was to better understand characters as central elements of media, art and culture and to sensitise attention to them in all their dimensions. In view of the breadth, fragmentation, and messiness of interdisciplinary research on characters, it seemed to me that the most important thing at the moment was to help consolidate the field and develop a general conceptual and argumentative infrastructure for it. To do this, it was necessary to connect many individual theories from different disciplines, to triangulate and comparatively evaluate them in order to identify the central questions, conflicts and gaps within the field, and to understand for which purposes certain approaches might be best suited. If I have criticised other theories in the process, this in no way calls their value into

question; I have learned much from them. In most cases, my criticisms concern only an over-extension of their scope, which often was originally limited to specific questions, dimensions or types of characters (e.g., Hollywood characters; represented beings; certain affective responses), but then expanded implicitly to the whole field.

Of course, I am aware that my book itself gives reason for criticism. Despite its excessive length, the complex subject matter has led to simplifications and imprecisions. Its biggest limitation may be that it touches only superficially on some important topics, such as the interplay between characters' various aspects, the phenomenology of their experience, their (trans-)mediality, their culture and history, or their use and misuse in sociocultural contexts. However, I hope that my approach helps to find more detailed 'piecemeal theories', case studies and empirical research on these topics (including vivid and subtle interpretations of characters) and suggests possible avenues for further research. Among the particularly interesting and under-researched topics are character constellations and characters' dimensions as symbols and symptoms. The Character Clock model could also facilitate the comparative analysis of characters in certain media, genres, oeuvres, cultures, epochs, or trends.

In addition to analysing individual characters and works in detail, a typological approach could also be useful for the purposes of some studies. The findings of this book suggest *typologies of characters* at several levels (see Table 13). Generally speaking, a distinction can be made between diegetic, artificial, symbolic, and symptomatic characters, depending on whether the focus is on the character as represented being (*Casablanca*), artefact ('The Child'), symbol (*Destiny*) or symptom (*Jud Süß*). Connected to this is the classification according to artefact qualities—for example, individualised or typified, realistic or non-realistic—and character conceptions such as mainstream realism, independent realism, or postmodernism. Types of represented beings include the human and the non-human, the latter falling into natural (animals, plants), artificial (robots, artificial intelligences), and fantastic categories (aliens, monsters, demons, ghosts, animated things). Various properties of represented beings are also emphasised more or less strongly in different works or genres. Some characters, particularly in action, porn, horror, or fantasy genres, are more strikingly physical in their appearance or abilities. Other characters are more psychological, for example in personality studies or mind game films, which present the characters' interior in detail and often from their perspective. Many characters in melodramas, political thrillers, or social problem films, again, are sociality-centred, as they are primarily characterised through their group affiliations, roles, and relationships. The numerous social (stereo) types in terms of gender, race, age, class, religion, profession, politics, or personality (such as worker, communist, or housewife), as well as conventional genre types (such as cowboy, femme fatale, mad scientist) are more finely differentiated. Basically, a typology of characters could be derived from almost every distinction made in this book, for example by referring to characters' position within a constellation (protagonists, antagonists; main and supporting characters); to their motivation (social or spiritual

needs; selfish or altruistic goals; achievable or unachievable desires); or to their mode of representation (predominantly visual, auditive, or linguistic).

The most general conclusion that can be drawn from this book is that characters have often been theorised and analysed too one-dimensionally so far and that we need to become more aware of their internal complexity and external variety. For far too long, most cognitive and psychological theories have focused almost exclusively on 'realistic' mainstream protagonists, and here on their dimension as represented beings. As a result, not only the symbol and symptom dimensions have been neglected in research, but also minor characters or characters beyond the mainstream. Some structuralists and formalists, again, have avoided the interpretation of characters altogether or reduced their analysis to actantial roles or their representation as artefacts. And psychoanalytic interpretations have often not recognised that, depending on the work and its context, alternative models of a character's psyche may be more appropriate than those of Freud or Lacan. Finally, researchers have often failed to distinguish between the creators' intended reception of the character, the empirical reception of actual audiences, and the ideal reception in optimally competent or inventive communication. If the argumentation of this book is correct, then this has consequences not only for many theories and critical judgements about characters, but also for empirical research on them. Among other things, it suggests that the results of many media-psychological studies on characters and 'parasocial interaction' with them should be re-examined to see whether they do not make inadmissible generalisations. It can be assumed, for example, that the reactions of psychology students to Hollywood protagonists do not cover the entire spectrum of experiencing characters.

In short, this book argues that it is time to expand our field of vision to examine the full spectrum of characters' features, forms, functions, and experiences. In view of their complexity, one could ask: What is the most important, decisive feature of characters? The answer is: their variety and diversity (see Table 13).

Criterion for differentiation	Kinds of characters
<i>Kind of being</i>	Human/non-human; animal, plant, supernatural or artificial being, alien, monster; hybrid
<i>Dominant dimension (Character Clock)</i>	Artificial, diegetic, symbolic, symptomatic character
<i>Textual binding</i>	Bound to specific text/transtextual/transmedial
<i>Fictionality</i>	Fictional/non-fictional/mixed/unclear
<i>Media-specific features</i>	Interactive/non-interactive, live/not live, 2D/3D, audiovisual/visual/auditive/linguistic/tactile/other,...
<i>Genre-specific features</i>	Of (melo-)drama, comedy, action, horror, thriller, fantasy...; specific non-fictional mode or subgenre,...

Criterion for differentiation	Kinds of characters
<i>Character conception</i>	Mainstream realism, independent realism, postmodernism, alienation, others
<i>Narrative level</i>	Part of frame narrative or embedded narrative; narrator
<i>Attention hierarchy</i>	Main, secondary, minor character
<i>Narrative role/function</i>	Protagonist, antagonist, helper, object,...; more specific functions, e.g., as parallel or contrast character
<i>Artefact quality</i>	(Non-)Realistic, consistent, complex, multidimensional, dynamic, transparent, others
<i>Style of representation</i>	Restrained/immersive, conspicuous/self-referential; characteristic use of specific stylistic means and narrative techniques
<i>Degree of typification</i>	Typified, individualised type, personalised
<i>Kind of typification</i>	Social stereotype, narrative/aesthetic stereotype, functional type (card, ficelle), archetype, others; genre types (monster, mad scientist, femme fatale, alien, robot, gangster, Westerner,...)
<i>Dominant traits</i>	Physical, psychological, sociality-centred characters
<i>Psyche/personality</i>	According to Big Five, psychoanalysis, or other models
<i>Sociality</i>	Intersectionality; social identity, position in intergroup relations
<i>Motivation of behaviour</i>	Dominance of want, need, or flaw; basic or higher-level needs
<i>Morality</i>	Moral position in character constellation (giving/taking)
<i>Character arc</i>	Positive/negative/ambivalent/no transformation
<i>Closeness/distance</i>	Degree of being close or distant to audience in terms of space, time, sociality, perspective, affect
<i>Perspectival relations</i>	Degrees of sharing character's mental perspective (e.g., as focaliser) or not
<i>Affective involvement</i>	Dominance of curiosity, sympathy, antipathy, empathy, or siding with the character; affects elicited by the character as artefact, symbol, or symptom

Table 13 Kinds of characters

From Theory to Practice: How to Analyse and Interpret Characters

The previous chapters have proposed a theoretical basis with categories and criteria for the analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and critique of characters in several respects: diegetic (Chapters 6, 9, and 10), aesthetic (Chapters 7 and 8), cultural, practical, and impact-related (Chapters 11 and 12), as well as affective-experiential (Chapters 13 and 14). In principle, all aspects dealt with in this book can become the starting point or focus of further investigations and more detailed studies. Some might be interested, for example, in the psyche of one individual protagonist, others in the ways the characters of a specific work are designed and experienced, others again in the cultural effects of certain character types that dominate a social discourse or historical epoch.

This suggests a programme of analytical practice that opposes dogmatism and advocates openness. The models and categories presented in this book are expressly not intended as rigid schemata or checklists to be ticked off, but as tools that can be used flexibly, depending on one's questions and objectives. As we have seen, the analysis and interpretation of characters can have very different forms and purposes.² Among other things, it can aim at the creative design of characters from a practical point of view; explore particularly fascinating or significant individual characters in depth; recommend adequate or interesting ways of experiencing characters; reconstruct or predict actual audience responses; aim to understand not only individual characters, but entire works in which they appear as central elements; compare different types of characters or characters in different genres and media with each other; serve a sociocultural critique of representation, stereotyping, and discrimination; or describe patterns and tendencies in large numbers of characters in the sense of digital humanities. Such types of analysis and interpretation require different approaches.

More concretely, there are different ways of working with the Character Clock model in the practice of analysis and interpretation, depending primarily on the aims of the investigation. If the aim is to understand a particular character (or a few characters) in a single work as comprehensively as possible, it may be useful to follow the general structure of this book. In this case, one first examines the features of the characters as

2 To summarise again: the term 'analysis' generally refers to the description or explanation of the structure and functioning of complex systems (such as characters, texts and discourses), which are 'broken down' into their individual elements and the structural relationships between these elements (Ancient Greek: *ana-lýein*). In contrast, 'interpretation' refers to the exploratory understanding of meaningful objects (again: characters, texts, discourses) embedded in subjective perspectives, affective experiences, and cultural practices, which requires a higher proportion of intuitive or holistic reasoning that is more difficult to prove or justify. The tools from this book can be used for both analysis and interpretation in this sense. Some might assume that each of the four dimensions of characters corresponds to a particular form of analysis or interpretation, for example, that the character as artefact might be studied through 'formal analysis', the represented being through 'narrative interpretation' (Wilson 2008), its symbolism and symptomatology through 'symbolic' or 'symptomatic interpretation' (Bordwell 1989) (see the introduction to Part VI and Chapter 11). I hope to have shown that such a categorisation would be too simple, as the four dimensions are interconnected and the study of each of them usually involves 'interpretative' parts in the above sense.

depicted beings, secondly their design as artefacts, and thirdly their relationship to the plot and their position within the character constellation. On this basis, their symbolic meanings, their symptomatic relations to reality, and the intended or probable reactions of audiences can then be determined. Alternatively, it may sometimes be preferable to start with establishing the individual character's most important contexts, for example by drawing a diagram of the character constellation and doing a sequence analysis of the plot, then position the character in these contexts and based on that explore their qualities as a represented being, artefact, symbol, and symptom.

In other cases, the aim of the analysis may be centred on a single aspect of one or more characters (e.g., their stereotypicality, form or effect), either because it is intuitively striking or because the research question addresses it. Some analyses concern specific relationships between a few selected aspects (e.g., how a character's form as an artefact contributes to thematic meanings or depends on production circumstances). In such cases, the aspects selected can be analysed in more depth, while the Character Clock also draws attention to their connections with other dimensions that should be kept in mind.

A third analytical goal may be to reconstruct in detail certain important phases in the representation and reception of one or more characters. Here the analysis can start from the artefact dimension and follow the model in a clockwise direction, from preconscious perception to higher-level processes of reception and understanding. When analysing Rick's exposition in *Casablanca*, for example, one could trace how from the preconscious perception of images and sounds a preliminary model of Rick gradually emerges and then evokes initial thematic associations (see Chapter 6).

Finally, if a study deals with many characters in a larger number of texts (such as production trends, eras, genres, or oeuvres), it often makes sense to focus on the most conspicuous features of these characters or those most interesting for a particular research question, and from there to explore further, less conspicuous aspects of the characters. Computer-aided methods of cultural analysis, distant reading or distant viewing could help to examine such larger sets of characters and their relationships to each other.

With each of these approaches, one could go into more or less depth depending on the time and resources available. If time is short, a first run could be limited to the most general categories listed in the inner ring of Diagram 34, or the most general questions listed at the end of Chapter 4. The preliminary results can then be deepened in a second round by moving on to the more specific categories in the outer ring of the diagram or the questions at the end of Chapters 6 to 14.

However, these are only rough suggestions on possible ways of working with the analytical tools in this book. I hope that these tools will invite others to use them, play around with them, try out new things, modify them, improve them, and adapt them to their own questions—which, fortunately, some have already done (see the end of Chapter 2). Most importantly, I hope that my findings can help others to produce

deeper, more nuanced studies of fascinating characters from a wider range of cultures, media, genres, and works, including also non-fictional media personae.

This book is primarily and unapologetically theoretical and therefore had to limit itself mainly to short, illustrative examples. While these examples concerned different kinds of characters from various countries, epochs, styles, and types of media practice, they were limited to cultural areas with which I am reasonably familiar, and their analysis had to be focused on selected aspects. In the next chapter, a final, more detailed analysis of a particularly challenging film will bring the different aspects of characters together to provide a more comprehensive case study and a more vivid form of summary.

16. A Challenging Case: Characters and the Weight of Reality in *Death and the Maiden*

The concluding case study brings together some of the key findings of this book. The drama thriller *Death and the Maiden* (1994) by controversial director Roman Polanski is challenging in many ways. It deals with the after-effects of human cruelty on survivors and perpetrators, with the legitimacy of vigilante justice and with questions of coping with trauma and guilt. The story: years ago, Paulina Escobar (Sigourney Weaver) was tortured as a member of the opposition in a South American dictatorship. She thinks she recognises the sadistic rapist of that time in Dr Roberto Miranda (Ben Kingsley), a chance guest of her husband Gerardo (Stuart Wilson). She takes him prisoner to force him to confess.

The film is based on the award-winning theatre play *La Muerte y la Doncella* by Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman, who had to flee the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in 1973. His play from 1990, written just after the collapse of the Pinochet regime, examines the long-term consequences of political violence in a newly forming democracy. It was successful worldwide, including on Broadway with a star cast. Dorfman chose Polanski from several directors who were interested in adapting the drama, wrote the screenplay together with Rafael Yglesias and became co-producer. Financing *Death and the Maiden* was difficult, and according to Box Office Mojo, the film grossed only three million dollars on a budget of twelve million. However, critics praised its fascinating core concept, its moral discourse, its differentiated protagonists and its expressive style.

The film's clear structure and its focus on just three people make it a suitable example to show how the various aspects of characters can be explored in their complex interconnections. As an adaptation of a theatre play, the film also lends itself to trans-media comparisons. Most importantly, *Death and the Maiden* is an aesthetically, ethically, and interpretively complex and challenging film, and its reception has changed in revealing ways over time. In the following, I will therefore also draw on more recent work that I came across while revising this new edition of my book (Bruun Vaage 2015; Dederer 2024; Kamir 2005; and others).



Fig. 55 The poster for *Death and the Maiden*. (Dir. Roman Polanski, *Death and the Maiden*, 1994, Capitol Films/Channel Four Films, USA/UK/France. All rights reserved.)

One aim is to substantiate a central thesis of this book: that the symbolic and symptomatic dimensions of characters are essential to how they are experienced and understood. When I wrote the first edition of this book in the 2000s, I chose the film for a case study because it had left a deep impression on me as a work of art, struck me as a perfect example with its complex characters in a minimalist setting, and featured a strong female protagonist embodied by an excellent actress with a record of powerful roles. My initial approach was to undertake a close analysis of the characters with a focus on their intended reception as represented beings, artefacts, and symbols. Today, I can hardly understand my limited awareness at the time, as many viewers (myself included) will now react to *Death and the Maiden* in much more ambivalent, divergent, or critical ways. After all, in this case we are dealing with a protagonist who is traumatised by political violence and rape, staged by a director who is both a Holocaust survivor and a proven rapist. For decades, however, Polanski's sexual abuse of thirteen-year-old Samantha Geimer in 1973 was largely ignored or excused in public discourses. Only since the #MeToo movement in 2017, the public view has changed significantly. For many viewers this discursive context has affected how they relate to Polanski's films, leading to an uneasy interplay of conflicting responses between diegetic immersion, aesthetic admiration, and moral revulsion, as several feminist writers have vividly described (Guirgis 2020; Dederer 2024).

In what follows, I will attempt to reconstruct this interplay and its factors, focusing first on the characters as represented beings and artefacts, then on their dimensions as symbols and symptoms (central categories introduced in the book will be emphasised in italics; all timecode figures are rounded). One aim is to understand how the characters' properties relate to each other and to viewers' cognitive and affective responses. I am not primarily concerned with intended, ideal, or actual reception here, but rather with modes of reception that are probable for certain audiences and that can be grounded in the interactions between their mental dispositions, the filmic text, and sociocultural contexts. Many of these hypothetical reactions correspond to my own actual ones and those of colleagues and students in several workshops and seminars, which may lend some validity to the analysis.¹ How widespread such modes of reception actually are, however, is an empirical question for others to answer; all that is relevant to my argument here is that they occur at least sometimes.

My analysis will focus on the characters and only touch on the film's narration and style insofar as it affects them. Some brief notes may give readers who are not familiar with the film at least a rough idea of what it looks and feels like and how it is structured. Generally, *Death and the Maiden* shares many stylistic similarities with other Polanski films, such as claustrophobic spaces, dark lighting, muted colours,

1 Screenings of the film at the Kiel Dramaturgy Workshop on 'Morality' (2001) and in later seminars at the University of Hamburg provided an opportunity to get to know how colleagues and students responded to the film. I thank them for their comments, and Hans-Jürgen Wulff for hosting the inspiring workshops in Kiel.

use of wide-angle lenses and long takes, sophisticated staging (often in three-shots), interweaving of horror film elements, and subliminal creation of uncertainty through camera movements, editing, sound, or other means.² At the same time, the drama adaptation also exhibits some distinctive features. The acting is more naturalistic than in Polanski's horror films or grotesques, the dialogues are longer and contain less humour or absurdity. Almost the entire film was shot in a house built on a sound stage in Paris, which adds to its claustrophobic feel (production designer: Pierre Guffroy). The interiors were often lit only with candles or lanterns (or little lights imitating them; cinematography: Tonino Delli Colli). The editing by Hervé de Luze is exceptionally tight. The restrained accentuation through Wojciech Kilar's original music is combined with leitmotifs from Schubert's profoundly grave string quartet (No. 14 in D minor, D 810). This audiovisual style shapes the viewers' perceptual and affective experiences of the characters and the gloomy atmosphere surrounding them. The chiaroscuro lighting, for example, chisels out facial expressions in close-ups and makes figures sink into dark, opaque, possibly dangerous environments in longer shots.

The narrative structure of *Death and the Maiden* is quite classic, apart from the framing by a short prologue and epilogue. It follows a strict unity of place, time and action and can be roughly divided into three acts: exposition of the characters and their central conflict; development of this conflict to a decisive turning point; new formation, climax, and resolution of the conflict. The first sections of my analysis follow this course of the film chronologically in order to show how it guides the viewers' experience of the characters as represented beings and artefacts. Focusing on three particularly significant phases—the exposition, the establishment of the conflict, and the climax and conclusion—the characters' systems of traits, their motivation, constellation, perspectives, artefact properties, and relations to some of the film's themes will be examined. Since the film is exceptionally well crafted, it may be assumed that in these respects, many reactions of Western, middle-class target audiences at that time were in line with the filmmakers' intentions (or an 'implied viewer'). But I will also point to some possible divergences and occasionally suggest how the characters might be understood otherwise or in greater depth. Exploring the characters as symbols and symptoms will then reveal major discrepancies between the ways in which they are experienced by different audiences.

16.1 Characterisation and Mental Modelling in the Prologue and Exposition

Let us start at the beginning of the film—or even earlier: with prior knowledge and expectations of the contemporary target audience in the largest markets, the USA and Europe. When the film was released in 1994, some viewers may have remembered

2 On Polanski's style see, for instance, Pizzello 1995 and the contributions in Orr and Ostrowska 2006.

Dorfman's play, which had caused a sensation a few years earlier. Many also most likely remembered the military regimes, death squads and newly forming democracies in Chile and Argentina, which had been widely reported on in the news. Film critics at the time emphasised parallels between the story of the drama and both Dorfman's and Polanski's own experiences of persecution—one narrowly escaped Pinochet's henchmen, the other the Nazis as a child. The star images of Polanski as a director of dark thrillers and psychological horror films (*Chinatown*, *Rosemary's Baby*), of the tough alien fighter Sigourney Weaver and of 'Gandhi' Ben Kingsley were probably familiar to even larger parts of the audience.

The film's poster and trailer suggest more specific expectations. The poster (Figure 55) places the stars Kingsley and Weaver in the foreground; they confront each other, their faces almost touching, Weaver holding Kingsley by the chin with one hand and a pistol in the other. Stuart Wilson, less well known than Weaver and Kingsley, is standing in the dark, blurred background, hardly recognisable, watching. The poster thus already accentuates the character constellation. It emphasises the violent conflict between the characters played by Weaver and Kingsley and at the same time suggests a sado-masochistic tension between them through the softly dissolved arch of her arm and the proximity of their faces tilted backwards, assigning the observing character the role of a witness or voyeur. The visual design of the poster also creates a tension with the film's title: the 'maiden', in classical iconography the victim of death, here seems to have power over life and death. The film's US trailer posed the question: 'How far would you go...for the truth?'

The film itself begins with the opening titles against a black background; musicians tune their string instruments. With the harsh first chords of Franz Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden', the first images appear: a string quartet on the stage of a concert hall, shown frontally in a static long shot, is playing the piece. A close-up: a woman's hand clasps the hand of a man (Figure 56). The couple in the concert audience, in a frontal medium close-up, only briefly visible: both middle-aged, he (Stuart Wilson)—dark, in a suit, with moustache and glasses; she (Sigourney Weaver)—in a sleeveless black evening dress, with a severe hairstyle (Figure 57). While she stares straight ahead tensely, he turns toward her with a grave look. The strings continue to play, and with a crescendo of the music, the film cuts to the surf of a rough sea smashing against a craggy rock cliff.

This prologue lasts less than two minutes and the two main characters can only be seen for seconds—just long enough to recognise them. Nevertheless, viewers already grasp important information and carry out lightning-fast operations to form mental models. The images of the quartet, the interlocked hands, the faces, all separated by cuts, come together to form a situation in which a bourgeois couple reacts with unusual intensity to an expressive piece of music (or something else?). Based on mental schemata (including 'concert', 'person', 'male'/'female', and 'bourgeois'), cultural practices (concert attendance), communicative conventions (of editing) and affective responses, the hands can be assigned to the couple, the couple to the concert situation, the agitated mood to both the situation

and the characters.³ At this early point, we only know what the characters look like and can roughly categorise their social status and current emotional state. But gradually we learn more about their personalities, their relationships, and their history.



Fig. 56 and Fig. 57 Introduction of the couple in the prologue of *Death and the Maiden*. (Dir. Roman Polanski, *Death and the Maiden*, 1994, Capitol Films/Channel Four Films, USA/UK/France. All rights reserved.)

3 This all might seem obvious, but in another context, the same sequence could be understood quite differently. For example, if it were part of a science fiction parody, the man and woman could be robots whose tenseness is caused by weak batteries, and the hands could be small aliens who have travelled from a distant planet to a concert of musician-machines. However, such divergences from common schemata would only be considered if information pointed to them, and of course, this is not what happens in this film.

An establishing shot shows coastal cliffs and a large flat house in the semi-darkness. A thunderstorm is raging, lightning strikes the sea. Only the rain can be heard. A text insert says: 'A country in South America... after the fall of the dictatorship'. The camera prowls from out of the darkness toward the lonely house, looks into the warmly lit interior, and glides closer to the open windows. Inside, the character played by Sigourney Weaver, in shorts and a sleeveless top, sets the table for a dinner for two while listening to the radio.

The temporal and spatial relationship of this scene to the first short sequence remains unclear, but narrative conventions make it very likely that a previous event is now being narrated (it can thus also be assumed that the characters will still be alive at the end of the following events). The first sequence had positioned the characters in a highly artificial *mise-en-scène*: the string quartet on the stage, the symmetrical frontal and static pictorial composition, the unison of musical rhythm and editing, the surf and thunderstorm as melodramatic tropes of agitated emotions—all this makes the narration appear conspicuous and stylised. However, the assumption that the characters might also be stylised is not confirmed as the story progresses. After the prologue has openly acknowledged the theatrical features of the chamber play, the film immediately abandons them, which becomes clear as the sequence progresses.

The outward appearance of the female character, particularly Sigourney Weaver's striking face, makes it possible to recognise her immediately and link the situations. The attribute 'bourgeois' that was established in the prologue is reinforced by the large house and its furnishings. The camera, which approaches the house and observes the woman, coming closer and closer, is reminiscent of horror films, the lonely woman may thus appear to be a 'defenceless victim' for a moment. However, this is immediately discarded. The camera enters the house through the window, gets up close to the character, who goes on listening attentively and then runs into a back room to turn up the radio. Her behaviour also draws the audience's attention to the radio news story that can now be heard. The first use of language in this film comes from a technical device. The news reports that President Romero has appointed civil rights activist Gerardo Escobar as chair of a commission to investigate murders and torture by the overthrown military junta. This has provided the names of two other characters, one of whom (Escobar) will turn out to be a main character shortly afterwards, while the other (the president) only reappears as a telephone interlocutor at the end of the film, but never becomes visible. We still do not know the woman's name; only much later do we get to know it. Until then, I will refer to her by the name of the actress, Weaver.

Weaver reacts to the news of Escobar's appointment by closing her hand into a loose fist and pressing it against her mouth, while lowering her head and looking up from below in a serious, even gloomy, way. A wrinkle appears on her forehead, she clenches her jaws. Her expression shows concentrated bewilderment caused by the news, but by what exactly? One might vaguely assume that she has something to do with the torture, knows the people mentioned, was perhaps a victim of the junta herself. In any case, from this moment on she is no longer just a bourgeois housewife

waiting for her husband. A range of possibilities has opened up in regard to the character: various prototypes could be applied here, such as 'the junta's victim', 'the partisan' or 'the spy'. During the news report we have the opportunity to study her more closely. Sigourney Weaver (the star) is forty-four years old at this time but looks younger here—or perhaps ageless. With her slender face, large dark eyes and fine nose, she looks good in a somewhat austere way, her strong jaw and narrow-lipped mouth giving her a touch of determination. She is tall, lean, and her movements and posture make her look well-trained.

The character's outward appearance and corporeality are now more clearly defined, but we have learnt very little about her personality so far. This is different in other films: *Casablanca*, for example, gives an impression of Rick's character through the dialogue of other characters even before we see him. The approach in *Death and the Maiden* follows a common pattern, as the outward appearance of a character is usually easier and faster to recognise than their psychological traits. Unlike many mainstream films, however, what we see of the character Weaver plays cannot yet be synthesised into an overall idea; it resists quick typification and calls for a slower, personalising mode of character synthesis. Numerous moments of pause show that she is thinking about something, especially when reacting to the radio programme, but there is no indication of what that might be. The viewers are repeatedly confronted with such gaps in the character model and its system of traits. The character is thus surrounded by an aura of enigma and mystery and challenges us to understand her.

What little is known about the character can be read for the most part from her appearance, especially her determined, serious, intelligent face. Neither dialogue nor action has so far added anything significant to the outward impression. This now begins to change. When lightning suddenly strikes and the electricity goes out, the house is in darkness, and the telephone does not work, she reacts to all this (unlike the audience, who are likely to flinch at this moment) with unexpected calmness and sovereignty, expressed above all in her posture and movements. The camera shows her partly from below and her wiry arms are foregrounded, so she no longer seems vulnerable but strong. Obviously not distracted, but still concentrating on the thoughts the news had triggered, she walks through the house, routinely lighting candles, and looks out into the evening and the rain, apparently waiting. Elegant extradiegetic music accompanies the scene—again a moment of waiting, a vain attempt to fathom her inner life. But her behaviour suggests that she has the traits of self-control and dauntlessness.

A short time later Weaver is dressed in a plain and functional way in a skirt and blouse (characterisation through costuming; costume designer: Milena Canonero). Apparently, someone she was expecting for dinner didn't turn up. She violently cuts into the roast chicken with a large knife, tears out a piece of meat with her fingers, throws salad onto her plate with her hands, grabs a bottle of wine, and sits down on the floor in a small room to eat. A little later, she steps out onto the veranda and smokes there, despite the pouring rain. The headlights of a car approach in the distance. When

the car becomes recognisable, she reacts, first incredulously, then with extreme fear, but in doing so she acts with great deliberation and control, as if she had rehearsed it for a long time: she hurriedly locks the house, turns off all the lights, takes a pistol out of the bedside drawer and undoes its safety. Pressed against the wall next to a glass door, she watches the car that stops in front of the house.

These sequences show three cases of deviant behaviour that stand out and characterise her. The scene of her eating shows pragmatism, a high potential for aggression, and extraordinary carelessness in dealing with things. This woman is not squeamish, not even with herself. That she smokes outside in the rain shows more of a callousness in dealing with herself. There seems to be something in her that makes her insensitive to the unpleasant weather, or maybe she even uses it to distract herself. The sequence of her response to an apparent threat seems like an often-trained drill—the woman moves powerfully, economically, and smoothly despite great tension, like a professional spy or partisan. Since she remained calm during the lightning and power failure, there must now be a serious threat. Thus, the character is now in tune with the star image and role biography of Sigourney Weaver, largely defined by *Alien*. This suggests a bundle of further characteristics (*halo effect*): among other things, this woman is probably self-confident, independent, intelligent but not intellectual, and has a strong position in social relationships. This is later partly confirmed, partly modified and partly refuted. The character's behaviour once again intensifies the questions about her background and the motives for her actions.

As she looks out the window, the woman's gaze relaxes. A man gets out of the car. It is the same one—probably her husband—we have already seen her with in the concert (Stuart Wilson). Completely soaked through, he stands in the rain, apologises frantically, and repeatedly thanks the car driver, who is not visible at first (this activates a cognitive script: getting a lift after a breakdown). The driver (Ben Kingsley) is then shown in a close-up in profile looking to the left, through masses of water streaming down the windscreen. He is about fifty years old. His gaunt, sharply cut face is reminiscent of a bird, his head is completely bald, and he has a thin, somewhat affected Menjou-style moustache. His eyes sparkle in the light coming from the left, which emphasises his profile with his prominent nose and chin. In the dialogue, his raspy voice and stiff, formal, slow way of speaking contrast with the other man's more pleasant, lively speech. The physical behaviour of the two men also differs strongly, with the driver appearing rigid and measured as he sits while the other walks around the car gesticulating, followed by the moving camera. Through a combination of casting, acting, costume and make-up, the driver vaguely resembles Latin American visual stereotypes, like that of a rundown grandee, while the other looks more North American and modern. The two men say goodbye and introduce themselves to one another. The wet one: 'Gerardo Escobar'. The driver: 'Dr Roberto Miranda'. The driver asks: 'The lawyer?' When Escobar says yes, Miranda's gaze follows him with a strange expression as he walks to the front door.

Here, two characters are portrayed at the same time and in contrast to each other.

We learn their names and hear them speaking, unlike the still nameless woman, who has been presented only through her non-linguistic behaviour. While Miranda is seen here for the first time, we have already met Escobar twice. We saw him briefly in the opening scene, which showed him and the woman together, and in the radio programme his name was mentioned as the head of the investigative commission and possible Minister of Justice (characterisation by others). Images, sounds, and dialogues intertwine to build a coherent character model when the various forms of presentation are linked together—first we only saw him, then we only heard his name, now we see him and hear him introduce himself. The information from the two previous representations, the purely visual and the purely acoustic, are thus combined and complement each other.

A lot can already be discovered about Gerardo Escobar's sociality through this short portrayal, such as his profession, education, class, and social role as a husband or partner. He is probably intelligent, ambitious, and wealthy. But the formation of the mental model of him again does not follow a mode of typification, but of individualisation. Neither his hectic, boyish behaviour and way of speaking, his apologies and expressions of gratitude, nor his completely dishevelled appearance in the rain fit the schema of the careerist lawyer, where one would expect strict attention to form and poise. His rather soft, open face and athletic body type do not fit the usual stereotype, either (in comparison, think of the cliché of the slick, unscrupulous, and thoroughly nasty lawyer in *Pretty Woman*). If Escobar corresponded to that schema, he would not only look different (casting), but would not be shown in such a situation—at least not at the beginning, when the priming effect takes place, which now relatively firmly establishes the traits 'boyish/clumsy'. The name 'Escobar' may well evoke associations with the drug baron of the Medellín cartel, who had died a year before the film premiered. This too does not fit the schema.

'Dr Roberto Miranda'—this name, like the thin moustache, oscillates between associations with pompous masculinity and affected effeminacy. The first name with its deep vowels and rolling consonants emphasises the former; the sound and meaning of the surname ('a female worth marvelling at') the latter. The car that Miranda drives, his formal dress with tie, his manner of expression, his title—all of this indicates that he belongs to the same class as his neighbour Escobar: that he is a wealthy, educated man. Ben Kingsley's face seems strikingly different from his portrayal of Gandhi, which then defined his star image. Harsh lighting and make-up make it appear sharper; the glittering light on the eyes makes them seem cold. On the other hand, Kingsley's star image brings some friendliness to Miranda's character, who also behaves in a very polite manner and has obviously just helped Gerardo Escobar. The enigmatic, expressionless look he gives him after the farewell, however, makes him seem suspect again. Thus, even in this first brief characterisation, Miranda appears to be ambiguous, enigmatic, multi-faceted—an impression that will be reinforced later. The assessment of Miranda in seminars where the film was shown was strongly divided: for some

participants, the coldness and ambivalence that the physical appearance, gaze, and name conveyed prevailed, while for others, the friendliness, politeness, and Kingsley's star image were in the foreground.

At this point—about seven minutes into the film—all three main characters have been briefly introduced and a provisional character model has been formed for each of them, including their physical appearance, their social status, and a first set of personality traits. After the relatively detailed analysis of these first few minutes, which still could only briefly touch upon the cinematic means of representation, I will now continue in a more concise manner, concentrating on new aspects and sketching the development of the characters up to the first plot point, the sequence in which the exposition and the first act of the narrative are usually completed, defining the central conflict which then carries through the rest of the film (Eder 1999: 51–66). At that point, about half an hour into the film, the character models have usually been developed sufficiently so that the characters' decisive traits, their relationships and the background of the situation permit more specific expectations about what will happen and how characters will act.

The initial phase of characterisation in a film's first few minutes is often mostly limited to establishing basic features such as gender, age, race and class and only suggests a few important character traits and relationships, so that the personality still has to be discovered. This is usually followed by a second phase of more intensive characterisation, particularly through the characters' interactions with each other and through dialogue. Language is particularly suited to convey large amounts of information economically, quickly and concisely. One can also sense that *Death and the Maiden* is based on a theatre piece that is carried more by language than by physical actions and striking images. The first dialogue between Gerardo and Paulina Escobar—only now do we learn her name—is a masterpiece of subtext: both know what it is about, but neither says it openly. In their indirect exchanges, both prove to be intelligent, quick-witted, humorous and sarcastic. Their relationship appears both very intimate (which is supported by the domestic setting, the candle lighting and the informal costumes) and extremely conflictual. Paulina seems to behave rather aggressively, Gerardo rather defensively.

It is only at the end of this dialogue scene that the audience can realise what was actually at stake: Paulina criticises Gerardo for taking charge of the—in her view half-hearted—commission to prosecute the junta henchmen, and she had expected him to tell her about his decision beforehand. He senses her angry reaction and tries to placate her with a series of excuses. His often factually unfounded attempts to excuse himself appear through frequent repetition to be his habitual behaviour. This characterises Gerardo as constantly feeling guilty (at least towards Paulina). When Paulina makes fun of Gerardo's future position, she also portrays him as a careerist. There seems to be some truth in this, even if this characterisation also appears biased in the argument between them.

In the dialogue, Paulina is not explicitly characterised by what Gerardo says, but

rather implicitly, through her own sarcastic way of speaking and through his constant fear of her reaction, which shows that she plays a stronger role in their relationship and tends to assert herself over him. Gerardo's weaker position and Paulina's stronger one are emphasised by their clothing, movements, spatial staging and the camera angle. She is still clothed, while he is only wearing a bathrobe. She maintains her position, while he moves and spatially evades her (the camera following him). While he sits and eats, she stands and smokes. The camera mostly shows him from above, her at eye level, and occasionally a wide angle shot emphasises their felt distance. Above all, however, Paulina's behaviour is dominant and aggressive, even obsessive. She smokes while he eats, mocks him with caustic wit, and finally takes away his full plate and throws the food in the bin when Gerardo refuses to talk about the commission.

Then the balance of power is reversed. Thick-skinned despite his guilt, he lets her anger bounce off him, takes the chicken out of the bin and carries on eating (deviant behaviour and comic relief, again contradicting the lawyer stereotype). She undresses and washes herself in the bathroom, her nakedness making her appear vulnerable (an example of how an altered presentation of physicality can also change the impression of personality). When the conversation vaguely turns to her past and the fate of other torture survivors, she breaks down and cries because she does not trust the justice system to prosecute the perpetrators, and finally ends with self-negation: 'I don't exist'. Here, at the latest, her previously emphasised aggressiveness and toughness turn out to be a strategy for coping with a terrible trauma.

Gerardo, who had seemed to be on the defensive, now justifies his decision to accept the leadership of the commission and emphasises his belief in the enforcement of justice. He tries to comfort Paulina with a tender approach, which becomes increasingly erotic from his side—he kisses her breasts, her belly—although she does not seem to respond. Thus, what at first seems like a sensitive attempt at reconciliation and consolation makes Gerardo seem thoughtless and selfish again a moment later. Paulina seems listless, she expresses her longing for normality, to 'live like suburban idiots' and to adopt a child. This remark and Paulina's past suggest that torture has destroyed not only her enjoyment of sexuality, but her life plans and maybe her ability to bear children, as well. Gerardo's ignorance is reflected by the chicken leg lying on the bed next to Paulina's head—an object symbolising that his attitude towards her at this moment is one of taking and consuming.

The characters react in different, unpredictable but consistent ways in this sequence and thereby various dimensions of their *personality* become clear, including strength/weakness, dominance/subordination, sensitivity/ruthlessness, hardness/vulnerability, honesty/dishonesty, and altruism/egoism. This makes them appear realistic, multidimensional and individualised instead of (stereo-)typical. That Gerardo reveals a hard core and strong career ambitions under his soft, clumsy shell explains his professional success and makes him a generally more plausible character. And yet: if one were to apply everyday standards—which one does not necessarily do

during the film—it would immediately be apparent that this realism is a textual effect, and that the behaviour of the characters is a plausible but still artificial construction. For example, their dialogues are smoother, more perfect, eloquent, and dramatic than most everyday conversations, their speech is always clearly understandable, and there are none of the slips of the tongue, pauses, filler words, or trivialities that everyday conversations are full of. But this remains within the framework of mainstream conventions and is barely noticeable. The audience may be more aware of the performance of the two actors in this scene, whose emotional shifts, linguistic subtext, and implied backstory demand a lot from them (appreciation as artefact emotion).

This phase of characterisation also shows how the audience's understanding and their formation of mental character models fluctuates between the attribution of situational reactions and permanent traits to the characters. It is often difficult to decide what is responsible for the character's behaviour, whether it is a permanent disposition or just a momentary impulse caused by the situation. Viewers are constantly weighing up personal and situational explanations of behaviour, with a psychological tendency to prioritise the personal. Repetitions (such as Gerardo's constant apologies) make it easier to recognise long-term character traits and a certain habitus. Viewers also often differentiate between the 'actual' personality of a character in the sense of original psychological qualities and their current personality, which has been changed by external influences. Paulina, one can assume, has always been strong, humorous and sensitive, but it is her traumatic experiences that have made her obsessive, aggressive and distressed.

At this point, the sequence begins that will culminate in the first plot point and the formation of the central conflict (about thirty minutes into the film). Miranda returns, allegedly to bring Gerardo's spare tyre. The two men are characterised by their dialogue: Miranda steers the conversation towards the commission and flatters Gerardo, who enjoys it, thus appearing vain. Miranda is obviously a calculating judge of character, and his statement about the junta perpetrators, 'I'm for killing the whole bunch of them', (which Gerardo rejects) shows a brutal side. The sequence continues with cross-cutting: Paulina eavesdrops on the conversation with growing tension, and when Miranda uses the phrase 'the real, real truth', she collapses in shock. She seems to recognise and fear him, and begins to prepare her escape secretly and in panic. While the men are drinking whisky and chatting in the living room, Paulina races away in Miranda's car. Gerardo thinks she has left because of their argument and gets drunk with Miranda, who reacts surprisingly calmly to the loss of his car. After Paulina finds a cassette with Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' in the car, she pushes the car off the cliff to plunge into the sea. Since her actions are not explained, her behaviour appears puzzling and possibly pathological. On the other hand, gaps are opened in Miranda's character model: Who is he? Do the two really know each other, and if yes, how? Is he dangerous? Which of his qualities make Paulina react in such extreme ways?

While Paulina is away, the two men drunkenly lament about women (we learn that Miranda is married and has two children). Here, too, the dialogue deepens the personalities of the characters, who both reveal sexist attitudes: Gerardo associates women above all with men's guilt, Miranda with castration and disempowerment. Gerardo, feeling abandoned and hurt, shows some disloyalty by complaining about Paulina's difficult behaviour. Miranda's reaction to the loss of the car is self-ironic, calm, and humorous, despite his stiff nature (making him seem multidimensional). One passage of the dialogue is indicative of their contrasting personalities. Miranda wants to quote Nietzsche but is not quite sure of the source. Escobar replies that 'if it's quotable, it's probably Freud'. Here the characters are linked to two cultural worlds through their references: Miranda that of the German philosopher with his power-centred admiration of the *Übermensch*, his emphasis on the will, his mysticism, irrationalism, and blatant misogyny ('...don't forget the whip'); Escobar that of the founder of psychoanalysis, who strives for enlightenment by exploring the unconscious and who appears more modern and liberal (at least compared to Nietzsche). After the trusting, naive Gerardo has offered his friendship to Miranda, who often seems inscrutable, the two men go to sleep.

These sequences in the film draw attention to some possible divergences between the ways in which different groups of viewers may experience the characters, although the similarities outweigh these differences. For example, the passages about Nietzsche and Freud presuppose a specific cultural knowledge, but ultimately only deepen traits of the two male characters which can essentially already be understood from their habitus and other utterances. Feminist and chauvinist viewers will assess the behaviour of the two men differently, but both groups will probably understand that the film represents their behaviour in a critical way. Viewers who have experienced persecution themselves will probably be able to understand Paulina's behaviour better, but even for them many questions will remain unanswered.

At around thirty-nine minutes, the film takes a decisive turn when Paulina comes back. Armed with a pistol, she approaches the sleeping Miranda and sniffs him as if she was an animal to identify him. With extreme precision and deliberation, perfect control and ruthless brutality, she overpowers the sleeping man by hitting him hard on the head with the pistol. She ties Miranda to a chair, gags him with her own underwear and adhesive tape, plays the Schubert cassette, and accuses him of torturing and raping her to this music. Gerardo wakes up and enters the room. Paulina's narrative now reveals parts of her backstory, details of the torture, and her damaged life afterwards (self-characterisation). She demands a confession from Miranda. Gerardo does not believe that Paulina can recognise her rapist by his speech and smell alone—her eyes were blindfolded during the torture. He wants to free Miranda, but she fires a warning shot. Paulina's strength, determination, and obsession are particularly evident in this high-action sequence.

16.2 Character Models and Artefact Qualities at the End of the First Act

At this point, I will temporarily stop tracing the development of the character models of the three main characters in *Death and the Maiden*. It has become clear how complex the process of character synthesis is, how varied the means of characterisation are, as well as the areas of everyday and cultural knowledge that the audience needs. Summarising the results, we see that images of the actors' bodies make the initial identification of the character, the establishment of a continuous identity, and a provisional assessment of crucial traits possible. These images present the outward appearance of the characters, which in turn allows provisional inferences about their personality traits, social roles, and other invisible qualities. The tendency to dispositional attribution as well as primacy and halo effects play certain roles here. The initial assessments are consolidated, modified and deepened by the situational context, the behaviour and the relationships of the characters, with dialogues playing a key role in characterisation. Furthermore, we have seen how all these forms of characterisation and mental modelling are based on and shaped by various stylistic decisions, particularly with regard to camera work, lighting, editing and music.

The exposition of all three characters continues over a longer period. Character synthesis does not take the form of typification, but that of individualisation. Particularly in the case of Paulina and Miranda, gaps in the character model are deliberately left open and information about them which we would need to know in order to be able to assess them is withheld. Is Paulina an aggressively obsessive psychopath, or is she a traumatised survivor in her right mind? Is Miranda a friendly neighbour who becomes a helpless victim, or is he a sadistic torturer who maintains a harmless front? These judgements would be essential in order to form an attitude towards the characters, but the relevant information is withheld. This strategy of incomplete characterisation means a tightrope walk for Weaver and Kingsley as actors, as they have to keep two opposing possibilities permanently open in their characters. Kingsley achieves this through stark underacting, by withholding expressions of emotion where one would expect them (e.g., in response to Gerardo's offer of friendship), through 'suspicious', 'cold' looks and, above all, by succeeding in creating a sense of ambiguity and concealment through the general reduction of his facial expressions. Weaver, on the other hand, alternates between controlled restraint and emotional outbursts, which is inherent in her role.

In terms of their *general qualities as artefacts*, the characters appear multidimensional, consistent, and realistic. The multidimensionality results mainly from their differing, sometimes surprising behaviour in changing situations, which adds new facets to their system of traits. Some stylisation and moments of theatricality can be observed, which go against the predominant realism, but mostly in the film's short prologue. Later, the language appears slightly stylised due to its above-average perfection, but this is not particularly noticeable.

In terms of overarching *character conceptions*, the protagonists of *Death and the Maiden* seem to be situated between the cinematic conventions of mainstream realism and independent realism, but through their allegoric qualities and temporary stylisation there are also some relations to other conceptions (like the character conception of the 'social gesture' in the sense of Brecht or Fassbinder). This mixture of conventions contributes to certain interesting tensions. Firstly, there is a tension between an unsettling image of humanity on the content level, which deals with torture and traumatising, and a more calming image on the representation level, which in principle aims to make the characters understandable (and promises to answer open questions about their psyche later). Secondly, the antagonists Paulina and Miranda are ambiguous, not yet fully comprehensible characters because the film withholds information about them, which is more in keeping with the conventions of independent realism. However, the characters are not fundamentally opaque or enigmatic, but rather two clear alternatives are set: Paulina is either mentally ill or not, Miranda is either a torturing sadist or not. Gerardo appears transparent and comprehensible throughout (as in the mainstream realist conception).

When analysing characters, a comparative overview of their main physical, mental, and social traits can help to better understand their constellation and their relationships to one another.⁴ At the film's first plot point, the following trait constellations have become apparent (evaluative expressions refer to standards of the Western target audience):

Paulina Escobar

Corporeality and outward appearance: age from mid-thirties to mid-forties; white; female; tall, slender, athletic; androgynous but fine facial features; good looking in an austere way; excellent control of her body and movements.

Sociality: married to Gerardo, housewife, wealthy; former resistance fighter and torture survivor, living in seclusion; no children (infertile?) or other close persons.

Personality and psyche:

- Mental instability: aggressive way of coping with a terrible trauma; identity in question, emotional defence; changes between extreme self-control and sudden outbursts.

4 Short character overviews are regularly used by experts and laypersons alike in analytical practice. For example, Godin's *Encyclopedia of Fictional People* offers the following short descriptions. On Paulina: 'Former South American political activist who has survived physical torture, though psychological scars lurk just below the surface. Married to lawyer Gerardo Escobar. She can be unmerciful and obsessively single-minded when faced with a challenge' (Godin 1996: 94). On Gerardo: 'Befuddled attorney spouse of Paulina Escobar. Gerardo likes to be helpful but is suggestible and can easily be manipulated. Unsure of how to handle certain situations when they veer out of control' (Godin 1996: 94). On Miranda: 'Music lover. Also, possibly, a onetime torturer of political prisoners, including Paulina Escobar. He likes to play out difficult situations with a deliberate, thoughtful approach. A lover of drink and conversation, prone to giving wry and mysterious remarks when occasions warrant' (Godin 1996: 198).

- Alternately tough and cool vs obsessive and paranoid vs desperate and helpless.
- Generally dominant, strong, well-planned, precise, powerful, uncompromising—in certain situations fearful, weak, in need of help and comfort.
- Originally loving, sensitive; traumatic experience has made her aggressive, reckless, unwavering, suspicious, even brutal, cynical.
- Intelligent, but education broken off by her abduction.
- Quick-witted, sarcastic, with caustic wit.
- Careless towards herself, lost the ability to feel joy and pleasure.

Paulina does not conform to any of the common stereotypes of the female victim, the lonely housewife or the South American resistance fighter; if anything, she recalls the narrative type of the avenging woman. The combination of her diverse, contradictory but compatible personality traits makes her a multidimensional and consistent protagonist. The constellation of her traits has some clear focal points: the dimensions of agency in thinking, speaking, and acting (intelligence, strength, energy, aggression) and the dimension of psychological instability due to injury and loss of originally given traits and abilities (tenderness, joy, trust). Paulina's behaviour has its central cause in her way of trying to cope, which seeks to suppress painful emotions and identity threats, to turn them into outward-directed aggression. Her current personality is shaped mostly by what she has become and diverges from the 'original' personality that sometimes shines through or is alluded to in the dialogue. Therefore, her past is particularly important in understanding her, and the question of other, unrepresented character dimensions becomes less relevant; they are also probably marked by her psychological injury. Drawing on psychological categories (such as Zimbardo and Gerrig 1999: 383), we could say that Paulina is prepared to transform a self-destructive, emotionally centred coping strategy of suppression and repression into an aggressive, problem-centred coping strategy—the attack on the (alleged) perpetrator. Because of what she has suffered, she is willing to go to extremes, and her physical and mental strengths make her dangerous. As the female protagonist, Paulina interacts with two different men:

Gerardo Escobar

Corporeality and outward appearance: aged in his mid-forties; white; male; tall, athletic; large, round face; generally attractive; clumsy movements and boyish expressions.

Sociality: married to Paulina; high status as a lawyer and part of the new democratic government; successful at work, but tends to act defensive, inferior in private relationships.

Personality and psyche:

- Tendency to avoid conflicts (though still trying to assert his interests); sometimes cowardly, opportunistic; tendency to feel guilty.
- Unreliable, weak character; vain, in need of acknowledgement, easily influenced, naïve.
- Intelligent, sensitive, tolerant; humorous, quick-witted.
- Affectionate, tender, warm, open; obliging, peace-loving, seeks harmony.
- Pleasure-loving, tends to be carefree, occasionally egocentric.

Gerardo is also a multidimensional and realistic character who does not conform to common stereotypes (such as that of the ‘successful lawyer’). His personality traits make him the counterpart to Paulina: the dimensions of agency and dominance in relationships are also in the foreground, but *ex negativo*, as weakness, and alongside a carelessness that is coded as naivety. His contradictory behavioural dispositions combine with a tendency to avoid conflict, seek compromise or behave opportunistically. Psychologically, his constant feelings of guilt could be explained by his striving for harmony and the failure to reconcile his own conflicting desires. These could be attributed to the situation (his difficult relationship with Paulina), but viewers are more likely to attribute them to his weak, opportunistic personality. With these traits, he also stands in stark contrast to:

Dr Roberto Miranda

Corporeality and outward appearance: age around fifty; white; male; medium sized, slim; bald, bird-like profile; rather unsightly appearance; restrained movements.

Sociality: married, two children; doctor; wealthy. Possibly a junta henchman who tortured people.

Personality and psyche:

- Intelligent, educated, highly self-controlled.
- Polite, helpful, sociable, self-ironic, cheerful; but also calculating, flatterer.
- Superficially stiff, correct; but underlying misogyny, vulgarity, and brutality.
- Moral character not clearly defined, ambiguous; possibly a cruel sadist.

Miranda, too, cannot be categorised as a conventional character type. His true personality is a black box at this point in the story—and will remain so until the end of the film. The few clear clues show him to be on a par with the Escobars in terms of intelligence and agency. Also emphasised are his excessive self-control, which is expressed in his gestures and manners, and a suspicious vigilance, which is reflected above all in his way of looking. Other indicators are generally ambivalent.

When comparing the three characters, certain similarities become apparent: all three are citizens of the same country, belong to an upper social class, can be read as white, are roughly the same middle age, heterosexual, able-bodied, intelligent and eloquent.⁵ Each of them is full of inner tensions. But despite these similarities, the characters' social roles and personalities could hardly be more different. Two former resistance fighters, one of them a torture survivor, meet a possible torturer of the junta. In terms of the Big Five personality traits, Paulina is contrasted with both men. Her current personality (but not her past one) shows strong signs of neuroticism, introversion, conscientiousness, and few signs of openness and agreeableness. In each respect, Gerardo is her opposite, and Miranda gives the impression of resembling Gerardo in this, while his true personality cannot yet be assessed.

With their contrasting traits, the three characters of *Death and the Maiden* point to a high potential for conflict, with the gaps in their characterisation to a puzzle structure of the plot, and with their multidimensionality to a thematic complexity of the narrative. Their different traits suggest that the characters will evoke different appraisals and affects in viewers (varying also according to the viewers' own dispositions, for example depending on whether they are women or men, or whether they have had their own experiences of persecution or sexual violence). Further questions arise: How do these different characters relate to each other? How can their motives and conflicts be described? How are they integrated into the plot? And what forms of affective involvement with them are likely to emerge?

16.3 Affective Involvement with the Characters at the First Plot Point

Before we turn to these questions, it makes sense to briefly recap the plot so far. Paulina and Gerardo Escobar live in a remote house on the coast of a South American country that was ruled by a dictatorship until recently. Gerardo is now to head a commission to investigate the murders committed by the dictatorship's death squads. His wife Paulina was herself kidnapped and tortured years ago. In Dr Roberto Miranda, Paulina believes that she recognises the sadistic doctor who supervised her torture and played Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' while raping her. But her only clue is his voice. While the men are talking, Paulina drives away in Miranda's car. After finding a Schubert cassette in it, she crashes the car off a cliff. She returns and overpowers the sleeping Miranda.

So far, the analysis has mainly shown how the individual characters are shaped as represented beings and artefacts through narrative and audiovisual means, leading

5 Here I am assuming that most Western viewers perceive Ben Kingsley's character as a white South American, although Kingsley's father is Indian and he has a slightly darker complexion than the other two characters. However, it cannot be ruled out that subliminal racism also plays a role in the perception of the Miranda character.

to certain mental models on the viewers' side. All three characters are individualised, multidimensional, complex, consistent, and mostly conform to conventions of mainstream realism and independent realism. Paulina is shown as a strong but severely traumatised personality who tends to act aggressively and unpredictably. Gerardo has a weaker personality and constantly feels guilty. Miranda is difficult to judge and may be evil underneath his friendly surface. Crucial questions about his personality and past remain unanswered: Was he really a torturing sadist or is he innocent? Certain character traits are emphasised by contrasts: Paulina's toughness and uncompromising attitude highlights Gerardo's weakness and compromising nature, his openness underlines Miranda's impenetrability.

The characters' traits form the basis for their relationships and the film's *conflict structure*. The central conflict manifests itself when Paulina returns and captures Miranda, but even before that, most situations were openly or latently conflictual. This is connected to an overarching narrative pattern, a puzzle structure of the plot: from the characters' expressions or behaviour, it can be inferred that they are in a conflict or are expecting one, but the audience cannot yet recognise what kind of conflict this is. The tightly clasped hands and the tense gaze of the couple at the concert point to such a hidden conflict, which later takes shape as the terrible significance of Schubert's quartet for Paulina becomes clear. Paulina's helpless rage at the news on the radio, her fear of the approaching car, the couple's argument about Gerardo taking charge of the truth commission—each of these conflict situations begins as a puzzle for the audience, who do not know what the characters know or what drives them. The epistemic perspectives of the characters and the audience, their respective knowledge of the situation, differ greatly from one another, which generates curiosity about the characters' conflicts, motives, and backstories.

This has consequences for the *affective involvement* with the characters as represented persons, the perspectival appraisal of their traits and situations. At this stage of the film, most viewers will already develop feelings for some of the characters, and the film also lays the foundation for occasionally empathising with them and developing similar affects to them, particularly Paulina. Her face and behaviour express intense emotions of fear, anger, or despair, and these expressions may evoke affective contagion (somatic empathy). Some of her situations, such as being alone at night in a remote house where the lights suddenly go out, may seem familiar to some viewers and evoke affective memories (situational empathy). The cinematic style, especially camera work, editing and sound design suggests also how she perceives her situation (perceptual perspective). Stylistic means such as the dark setting, chiaroscuro lighting, prowling camera movements, foreboding music, sudden cuts and shock effects create a threatening mood, a diffuse atmosphere of menace that surrounds both Paulina and the audience (projective empathy).

Nevertheless, at this stage of the film it is difficult to empathise with her or any of the characters in a more significant way and develop similar emotions, because

the viewers do not learn the characters' motivational perspectives, and thus cannot understand the reasons why they feel the emotions they express. We can see that Paulina is tense, angry, anxious or desperate, or *that* Gerardo feels guilty, but we don't know why: what thoughts, memories, or imaginations trigger their emotions. As the goals of their actions are unclear and these actions are mostly verbal, bodily simulation and co-experience (via mirror neurons or other processes) are diminished. The affective perspective thus remains underdetermined due to a lack of information, which makes it difficult to feel specific empathic emotions.

Later, I will say more about the development of empathy and imaginative closeness to the three characters, but at this point just note that the film's exposition focuses on other forms of affective involvement. First of all, interest is aroused in the enigmatic characters and their puzzling behaviour, curiosity about their motivation and backstory, and suspense about the solution to their mystery through the further development of the plot.

Moreover, the film invites the audience to develop sympathy for Paulina and Gerardo, to assess them and feel for them from an observer's perspective. This happens through various elicitors of preconscious and conscious, universal and group-specific, moral and non-moral appraisal. As former members of the democratic resistance and victims of a dictatorship, Paulina and Gerardo are placed in a positive moral position: they have given a lot to society, and the regime has taken a lot away from them. (Later, the viewers will learn that Paulina in particular suffered terribly to save Gerardo.) The film often emphasises their vulnerability, and the fact that Paulina is suffering from severe trauma and that the two are threatened by attacks arouses compassion and fear for them. (Sigourney Weaver's earlier roles as a determined but sensitive fighter may support that.) In addition, Paulina and Gerardo possess many non-moral positive qualities: they are attractive, show humour, intelligence, and despite their quarrels, a loving affection for each other. As an upper- or middle-class couple, their social status resembles that of many viewers (or that which viewers may aspire to). The film shows them at length 'behind the scenes' of their social roles as lawyer and housewife, making them familiar and close. Everyday domestic situations such as preparing dinner, waiting for someone, getting soaked by rain, talking about relationships, or caressing loved ones can remind viewers of their own everyday experiences and create a sense of commonality with the characters.

The motives that they express are also essential for the development of sympathy, taking sides, and later also empathy. Both Paulina and Gerardo are very seriously (albeit in different ways) concerned with clearing up the crimes of the murderous regime—an altruistic goal connected to their own suffering. Both wish to be able to live happily and 'normally' again—an easily understandable and widely accepted social need. These needs and desires set the basic direction of motivation in this early part of the film. In addition, there are more local wishes, some of them related to traditional gender roles. Gerardo, for example, would like his wife to support his career plans

and Paulina wishes for a child (a wish that could only be fulfilled through adoption after her torture). At least in some respects, the viewers are invited to feel close to such motivational perspectives, be it with regard to political commitment, partnership, or other aspects mentioned. Moreover, the film does not create substantial alienating or distancing effects that would interfere with sympathy. The path is therefore paved to develop mostly sympathetic feelings for Paulina and Gerardo.

Miranda, on the other hand, leaves a more ambivalent affective impression. I call him by his surname here because the film does not allow any familiarity with him. He comes to the Escobars' house as a stranger, is never shown in private scenes, and the reserved, contradictory information about him and his motives ensure that he remains difficult to judge. In his favour are his helpfulness, politeness, and self-irony, as well as positive associations due to Ben Kingsley's star image. His stiff demeanour at times makes him appear as an eccentric original. But other traits invite more negative appraisals. His appearance does not conform to conventional notions of attractiveness, and his voice and laugh are rather unpleasant. His cold gaze and flattery make him seem calculating and untrustworthy. The effect of his bird-like profile and the combination of casual suit and heavy boots fluctuates between light comedy and quiet menace. Most importantly, it gradually becomes clear that Paulina is afraid of him, because he may have committed the worst crimes. The audience's reactions to him are therefore likely tending to suspicion and antipathy.

The characters' traits invite an appraisal that is primarily based on intersubjective criteria rather than group-specific interests such as political partisanship or erotic desire. It may well be that female and male viewers react differently to the characters due to their life experiences (e.g., with sexual violence or gender roles), but these differences are probably more gradual than fundamental. Supporters of authoritarian politics may view the characters differently than liberals (perhaps with less sympathy for Paulina and Gerardo), but they are probably not part of the film's target audience. And although Paulina's unclothed body is shown briefly at the beginning, the staging aims less to objectify her erotically than to emphasise her vulnerability.

Overall, it is to be expected that the audience's sympathy and antipathy will be distributed in a certain way among the characters: Paulina, as a strong personality and traumatised survivor of state violence, is probably viewed more positively than the sometimes weak and opportunistic Gerardo, Gerardo in turn more positively than the dubious and possibly evil Miranda. In the further course of the film, these different dispositions of sympathy and antipathy will influence how the audience hopes or fears for the characters in events concerning them, appreciates or disapproves of their actions, and takes sides for or against them in their conflicts. In addition, the viewers' appraisal, side-taking and character-related curiosity and suspense are steered by narrative and stylistic techniques of conveying or withholding information and creating imaginative closeness or distance to the characters. The analysis will soon take a more general look at these aspects, but here are a few examples from the film's first major turning point.

Before the three characters clash in the central conflict, the pattern of the informational undersupply of the audience and the puzzle structure familiar from the previous, smaller conflicts is repeated several times, which points to the continuing importance of curiosity about the characters. When Miranda returns to the house and talks to Gerardo at the front door, a close-up shows Paulina, who is listening next door, flinching at the sound of his voice and covering her mouth with her hand in a striking gesture. This expressive gesture, accompanied by a high, half laughing, half sobbing sound, points to a complex, elusive feeling, an affective no-man's land between extreme disgust, desperate laughter, and incredulous horror. But the viewers are again left alone with the question of what this brief gesture means. Again, empathy is not possible here, because it is not clear what Paulina's expression is referring to, it is only clear that Miranda has something to do with it. Paulina sneaks away in panic, steals Miranda's car, searches it, finds the cassette, lets the car plummet off the cliff, and returns. Why she does this, what more she intends to do, what her goals are can only be guessed at—or deduced from previous knowledge about the film. The affective change from panic and fear to aggression, which obviously took place here, is at first difficult to comprehend. Neither folk psychology nor empathic simulation of Paulina's actions could provide a solution; they only indicate that Paulina now has a plan, but not which one.

This sequence contains further revealing details concerning the role of the *narrative perspective* in the affective reactions to the characters and their actions. Firstly, there is one of the rare explicit point-of-view shots in the film. In the car's rear-view mirror Paulina sees the house and Miranda shouting behind her as she drives away. Sharing Paulina's perceptual perspective does not give the audience any further information about her inner life. Nevertheless, a certain degree of imaginative closeness to her is created. Like her, the viewers escape the narrow domestic space, which was already beginning to appear claustrophobic. For the first time, they are now getting away from the house with her, whose face appears in a close-up reaction shot, while the two men remain near the house and are swallowed up by the darkness of the night. From the very beginning, when Paulina is shown alone in the house, the film isolates her in the character constellation. At the same time, it sets her up as the centre of experience in the story; this tendency is strengthened here. Paulina is separated from the men not only spatially and through her emotions and behaviour, but also because she is a woman. After she has left, the two men get drunk and complain about women in a blatantly sexist way, which can reinforce the siding with Paulina.

The second interesting moment occurs a bit later when Paulina smashes Miranda's car down the cliff (at about thirty minutes into the film). This is a point of no return in her actions, since it inevitably leads to the most serious conflict thus far. Her motivation is still not clear, her reactions to Miranda's voice and to finding the cassette in his car provide only vague hints that do not reveal her goals and plans. The car gets stuck on the edge of the cliff and Paulina has to use all her strength and weight to plunge it into

the depths. The affective reactions of seminar participants asked about this short scene went in two different directions. One group hoped (against all narrative probability) that Paulina would not succeed in destroying the car, as this was the only way for the likeable character to escape a conflict that promised nothing good for her. In contrast, other viewers were just waiting impatiently for the car to finally crash so that Paulina could take her action to its intended outcome. This unassuming example points not only to the diversity of actual audience affects (even when viewers share a disposition of sympathy for the character), but also to a fundamental openness of many creative choices in storytelling. The affective function of the scene was obviously to create an increase in suspense through retardation. This narrative goal was achieved for both groups of viewers, although their hopes and fears for the character went in diverging directions.

The audiovisual style is also important to create character-related suspense, curiosity and surprise. An effective camera movement introduces Paulina's return from the cliff (and the film's second act). From a position inside the living room, the camera shows Miranda, who has fallen asleep on the sofa, in a medium long shot from above. Accompanied by soft, suspenseful music, the camera pans and tracks in a semi-circle through the dark room, past a curtain wafting into the room, comes closer and closer to the wall, goes on very tightly along a dark section of the wall for a moment, and ends abruptly, shock-like in a close-up of Paulina's face, staring almost directly at the viewer through the windowpane. The shot could have been taken from a horror film; then Paulina would be the killer. In fact, she has shifted roles from the fleeing victim to the attacking perpetrator. This transformation is not shown here by means of her actions, but rather by means of a cinematic device, the camera movement that contextualises and comments on the events. This is a concise example of characterisation through cinematic style and at the same time of a para-proxemic effect of film style: Paulina is suddenly thrust into the viewers' felt personal space.

While Miranda still lies unsuspectingly sleeping on the sofa, Paulina takes off her shoes, sneaks through the dark with a pistol at the ready, and searches the kitchen to find a cord and tape to tie Miranda up. She approaches him quietly, looks at him for a moment, sniffs at his neck like a predatory animal. He wakes up and she knocks him down, hitting his bald head with two powerful blows of her pistol. He falls from the sofa to the floor, blood oozes from a cut on his head. Paulina ties the unconscious man to a chair. When he regains consciousness and wants to say something, she strips off her panties, stuffs them in his mouth, and gags him firmly with tape. She plays the Schubert cassette and begins an interrogation in which cynical kindness, beatings, and humiliation in word and deed alternate. Obviously, Paulina is re-enacting a scene she herself experienced in her past role of the victim. In her behaviour, angry hatred and satisfaction mingle with distressing memories.

Gerardo wakes up and comes to them. He is initially confused and doesn't understand the situation. Paulina tells him that she has recognised that Miranda is the

sadistic doctor who oversaw her torture. But her only evidence is Miranda's voice, the expressions he uses and his smell, because she was blindfolded throughout the abuse. Gerardo thinks she is insane and wants to free Miranda. Paulina stops him by firing a warning shot at the floor and threatens to shoot Miranda if Gerardo tries to free him again. She wants to stage a trial with Miranda and have Gerardo defend him as his lawyer. Gerardo is shocked and initially sides with Miranda, firstly because he does not believe Paulina, who has acted in paranoid ways before, and secondly because his sense of justice goes against her taking the law into her own hands. He accuses her of acting in the same way the old regime did. Another, more selfish reason, however, seems to be that he sees her actions as a danger for his career and position on the commission.



Fig. 58 Paulina, Gerardo, and Miranda—the antagonistic configuration of the characters after the first plot point. (Dir. Roman Polanski, *Death and the Maiden*, 1994, Capitol Films/Channel Four Films, USA/UK/France. All rights reserved.)

16.4 Conflict Structure, Motivation, and Side-Taking in the Second Act

It is only after three quarters of an hour of the film, very late compared to the mainstream standard, that with Gerardo's intervention the constellation of the central conflict is fully established (Figure 58). Here we have arrived at a core of character analysis (and particularly 'narrative interpretation' in the sense of Wilson 2008): the structures of the characters' constellation, motivation, and conflict. The film has taken an unusually long time to explore its three main characters and play with the audience's curiosity about Miranda's identity, Paulina's motivation, and their backstory. However, the main *plot functions* of the characters are now established. Paulina is the protagonist who

carries out the most important actions. Her goal is to force Miranda to confess his guilt. Miranda is the antagonist with the opposite goal: he refuses to confess and claims that he is innocent. Gerardo is initially Miranda's helper and Paulina's antagonist: he tries to free the captive and dissuade his wife from realising her plan. As Miranda, who is tied to the chair, has few possibilities of action himself, Gerardo acts on his behalf (as a contagonist). The conflict constellation at this point can thus be visualised in the following diagram (double arrows indicate conflicts, single lines alliances):

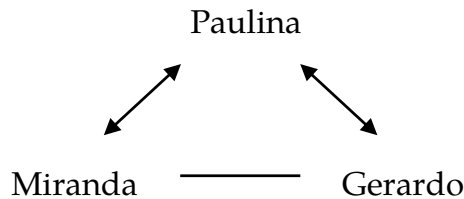


Diagram 35 The conflict constellation in the second act of *Death and the Maiden*

Paulina finds herself in a double conflict: with Miranda because of the confession, and with Gerardo because of Miranda. In contrast to her, Gerardo is also in an inner conflict: should he help his wife or her prisoner? The main action now consists of Paulina trying to get a confession from Miranda, which he refuses, and Gerardo's efforts to dissuade Paulina from her goal. As the conflict progresses, the characters' goals partially change. Through his conversations with Paulina, Gerardo begins to believe that Miranda might actually be guilty. Later, he tries to persuade Miranda to confess, and remains inactive when he would have to turn directly against Paulina. When Miranda brings Paulina down and she loses the gun, he allows her to take it back and regain power over her prisoner. 'Of course he just stood there, he's the law', Paulina sarcastically remarks when Miranda accuses Gerardo of becoming her accomplice. But when Paulina finally decides to kill Miranda, Gerardo again wants to prevent this. The conflict moves to a higher level, but its basic structure remains the same until the film's climax.

The outer goals (wants) of the characters are now defined, but what are the deeper levels of their inner motivation, their needs and key flaws? What drives Paulina to take the law into her own hands? What does she hope to achieve for herself? This question would not even be asked in a mainstream film with a conventional plot of revenge and vigilante justice (e.g., *Death Wish*).⁶ There the actions of the heroic avengers are justified

6 In a creative writing manual, Ronald B. Tobias writes about the dramatic structure of revenge plots: 'We respond at a deep level when someone violates us or anyone else who doesn't deserve violation. [...] It's as if you say to the reader, "If it could happen to this person, it could happen to you, too." [...] And to protect ourselves from that kind of outrage [...] we demand swift and complete justice. You put yourself in a strong moral position as you write this plot. You say what is proper and what is improper behavior. Be careful. What you recommend may be wild justice, but that too may have its price. [...] This brings us back to the discussion about motivation and intent. Revenge is the intent of your hero. But what is your hero's motivation for wanting to get revenge? [...] Do you want the reader to remain sympathetic, or do you want to show how seeking revenge distorts the values of the character?' (Tobias 1993: 108–09).

since we see the injustice done to them and simply because they are the heroes. In such films, revenge is a 'natural' feeling, a matter of course for the audience. In *Death and the Maiden* it becomes questionable, especially, but not only, because one is in doubt about the guilt or innocence of the alleged torturer.

In the dialogue, parts of Paulina's backstory are finally revealed to the viewers: fifteen years ago, she was kidnapped, interrogated, and tortured by henchmen of the dictatorship in an attempt to make her betray Gerardo, who at the time was the editor of an oppositional newspaper and her lover. Her silence saved his life. Now Paulina is accusing Miranda of having been the doctor who oversaw her torture with electric shocks and raped her fourteen times to Schubert's music. Miranda strongly denies the allegation and claims that he was abroad at the time. Gerardo asks Paulina to talk to him about the rapes. They leave Miranda in the living room and have a longer conversation on the veranda, during which Paulina's motives become clear. This also changes the audience's relationship to the three characters.

The dialogue is presented through shot/reverse shot editing. Paulina is standing in the dark with the gun in her hand in front of the illuminated window. We can assume that Miranda is behind it, tied up in the living room. The leitmotiv from Schubert's quartet can be heard softly in the background. We see Paulina from above, looking over Gerardo's shoulder, which makes her seem small and vulnerable. Gerardo is shown slightly from below, from a position close to her visual perspective. Clouds drift past the moon behind his head. (Such images of landscapes expressing feelings are used several times in the film, often linked to characters' faces.) First the couple argues about the right and wrong of Paulina's action. 'We're supposed to be different' and 'Think what that will do to the movement', Gerardo says. She insists on her subjective right as a trauma survivor: 'I'm free, for the first time since I was buried alone with this terror'. This is the first time that the psychological effects of the torture are mentioned directly, and that Paulina reveals anything about them.

They talk about the rape, which Gerardo didn't know (or didn't want to know) about until now. Paulina begins to describe the details to him—the iron rod for the electric shocks that was inserted into her vagina, the terrible effect of the shocks, how Miranda approached her, at first appearing to be her saviour, but then brutally raping her. As Paulina's narration begins, the camera gradually breaks away from the over-the-shoulder perspective and in a slow swinging movement tracks in on Paulina's face, which is turned sideways away from Gerardo so that only the viewers can see her expression. Her face shows a desperate struggle for self-control, and at the moment when she loses this control for a few seconds, we are closest to her in space. Her voice breaks, she sobs, forces out the words, becomes calmer again. Then the camera slowly swings back to its starting position behind Gerardo's shoulder. There is nothing melodramatic about the scene. Technically speaking, it is a 'scene of empathy' (in the sense of Plantinga 1999) due to its slow pace, the mood music and the camera movement towards an expressive face. However, empathy in the specific

sense of sharing Paulina's feelings, is hardly possible (especially for male viewers) in view of the terrible things she reports soberly and objectively. It seems as if she is generalising from her own fate to that of other victims in order to maintain her self-control. The shortcut of spontaneous somatic empathy or affective contagion remains blocked to the viewers, they are led on a longer path of imaginative perspective-taking, to a goal-oriented, conscious process of trying to imagine what Paulina must have gone through. But mostly, they will probably feel intense compassion and respect for her. The viewers' sympathy for Paulina is considerably strengthened, as it now becomes clear how much she has suffered to save her political comrades and Gerardo in particular (altruism; prosocial action; giving/taking).

Deviating from the convention of depicting traumatic memories visually in flashbacks, Paulina's past history, the cause of the current events, is never shown in pictures, but only told in her dialogue. This narrative form fulfils several functions. Firstly, it focuses the experiential perspective on the present, on the long-term consequences of inhumanity for the survivors. Secondly, it protects the dignity and strength of the character, avoids a voyeuristic exhibition of her suffering and instead supports emotions such as respectful compassion. Thirdly, the focus on dialogue and the present creates a certain distance that prevents the audience from siding too much with Paulina, separating the audience's motivational perspective from hers and keeping the possibility open that Miranda is innocent. If the torture were shown in flashbacks, there would also be a danger that viewers would look for visual clues for Miranda's guilt and come to a premature judgement.

After her account of the rape, Paulina explains her motives to Gerardo, answering his question: 'What do you want?'—a question that the viewers may also be asking themselves. First, she speaks of her hatred, of a desire for revenge, of the impulse to rape Miranda with a broomstick herself. Hate and revenge seem to have been the immediate motivations for her actions; she wants the rapist himself to feel what rape means. There is a strong sexual symbolism in Paulina's actions that underlines this: she smells him, gags him with her panties, sits astride his lap, bites his neck, reenacts the humiliations of her rape. This behaviour has nothing to do with lust, but rather makes it clear that rape is not primarily a sexual act, but one of aggression, destruction, and the exercise of power. This points to Paulina's deeper need: she wants to free herself from being at the mercy of others, from the permanent fear and traumatising, from the memory of humiliation and powerlessness. She wants to regain her own agency and demonstrate this to the man who hurt her, who in her imagination still has power over her. This is evident not only in her behaviour, which is aimed above all at humiliating Miranda, but also in the dialogues: 'Out there maybe you bastards are still running things behind the scenes, but in here... in here, I'm in charge', she says, while holding a pistol to Miranda's throat, and 'It's time for me to reclaim my Schubert'. To Gerardo she admits: 'No revenge can satisfy me'. She finally wants to 'let the past become the past'.

Paulina's primary motive is therefore not revenge but liberation (even if one cannot completely trust her claim that she will not seek revenge, as she lies to Gerardo that

she parked Miranda's car undamaged at the side of the road). Her central outer goal is Miranda's confession; her inner need is to be healed from the trauma. The question for the audience is whether this need could actually be fulfilled by the confession—since it is questionable whether Miranda is in fact the perpetrator—and moreover, even if that is the case, whether Paulina's actions are truly justified. Two questions are thus raised. First, is Miranda guilty? And second: Even if he is guilty, is it morally right to treat him this way?

Gerardo's motivation changes in the course of the narrative. His outer goal is first to stop Paulina from carrying out her plans and to stick with legal justice, then to find out the truth, and finally, more generally, to find a compromise and get out of the precarious situation as well as possible without making himself guilty in regard to either Paulina or Miranda. His inner need is to overcome the feelings of guilt he has towards Paulina, to prove his love for her, and to come to a decision that is morally right. Therefore, he is caught in an inner conflict between his love and loyalty to Paulina on the one hand and his sense of justice (as well as his career) on the other. The viewers are placed in a parallel situation between sympathy for Paulina and disapproval of her actions. The sympathy for Paulina turns into concern and is at times even put into question, for example, when she is willing to accept that an innocent person could be murdered: 'If he's innocent, then he is really fucked'.

The sympathy for Paulina and Gerardo induces the viewers to wish for certain developments in the plot. Firstly, Paulina's inner need should be fulfilled, and she should be freed from her trauma. It does not seem plausible, however, that this would actually be possible by achieving her outer goal. For if Paulina were to harm or kill Miranda, she would lose the viewers' sympathy, become guilty herself and seriously endanger her future and her relationship with Gerardo. Despite all the problems involved, this relationship is marked as a positive emotional pole, so that a third wish is likely to be that Paulina and Gerardo get together again, changed by their experience and as a happy couple. If Miranda is guilty, he should be punished, but not through Paulina's vigilante justice.

Miranda's aim stays the same: to free himself and convince Gerardo and Paulina of his innocence, which rules out a confession. After the conversation between Paulina and Gerardo, he is even further away from this goal, as Gerardo is now tending to side with Paulina. Her description of the rape has moved him deeply, her assurance that she does not want to kill Miranda and has left his car at the side of the road reassures him, and further evidence (such as Paulina's statement that her torturer always quoted Nietzsche) makes Miranda's guilt more plausible to him. The conflict constellation has shifted, but Gerardo's (and the viewers') doubts about Miranda's guilt are by no means completely dispelled. Gerardo now wants to persuade Miranda to make a confession, whether real or fake, so that he can go free. But Miranda continues to deny any guilt. The audience's questions remain, and the question of how to deal with a guilty person and whether it is justified to take the law into one's own hands becomes even more acute.

The film's intricate conflict structure thus also puts the audience in a conflicted position. As in a detective film, they are supposed to solve a mystery and find the guilty party, but they are denied the means to do so, and perhaps there is no guilty party at all. As in a courtroom drama with Paulina as the prosecutor, Miranda as the defendant and Gerardo as the defence lawyer, they are supposed to reach a just verdict, but in this case the evidence is confusing and the law itself is up for debate.

However, viewers not only appraise the characters themselves, their personalities and long-term motives, but also their temporary actions and the situations that affect them. In addition, the characters' actions can constantly reveal new facets of their personality, which can change the audience's attitude towards the character in question. Viewers will generally sympathise with both Paulina and Gerardo, which often makes it difficult for them to take sides in favour of one and against the other in their conflict. Furthermore, due to their key flaws, Paulina's ruthless obsession and Gerardo's opportunistic egoism and moral weakness, both characters repeatedly cross the line of morally acceptable behaviour. In such situations, considerable tensions arise between the audience's disposition to fundamentally like the characters and take sides with them on the one hand, and moral disapproval of their current actions on the other. This makes it likely that viewers will shift their attitude towards the characters again and again and, depending on the situation, sometimes take sides with Paulina, then again with Gerardo (and in rarer cases also with Miranda). Feminist law scholar Orit Kamir summarises this aptly: 'At times Gerardo seems the only reasonable, decent, stable point of reference, while Paulina appears monstrous, preoccupied with sickening vengeance, hatred, and rage. At other moments Paulina seems courageous and truthful, a vulnerable woman in need of sympathy and compassion, while Gerardo appears weak, cowardly, and unable to love' (Kamir 2005: 58). However, the viewers' changing appraisals of the characters' traits, actions and motives are not only guided by narrative situations and intersubjective moral criteria, but also by subtle film techniques that create specific perspectives on the events and different degrees of closeness or distance to the characters.

16.5 Perspective Relations and Imaginative Closeness up to the Climax

In any character analysis, certain aspects emerge as particularly significant. In the case of *Death and the Maiden*, these include the cinematic strategies of creating different kinds of imaginative closeness and distance (see Chapter 13 and Chapter 14 of this book). Among other things, they are decisive for the discourse on law and morality that the film conducts. As film scholar Margrethe Bruun Vaage has pointed out, the moral appraisal of fictional characters differs in specific ways from everyday morality: intuitions and emotions are given greater weight; the awareness of fictionality provides relief from real-world consequences; moral transgressions can be perceived

as fascinating; and appraisal is biased in favour of familiar characters that are loyal to their significant others and whose actions can be empathically co-experienced (Bruun Vaage 2015). Our case study shows that the cinematic creation of imaginative closeness and distance is a further crucial influence, shaping the affective involvement with characters and preparing the ground for their symbolic and thematic meanings. In *Death and the Maiden*, the viewers' experience of the characters is influenced by a complex, dynamic network of different aspects of closeness. Some have already been mentioned, such as the social closeness to Paulina and Gerardo, who are shown in intimate situations at home (while Miranda intrudes as a stranger from outside), or the affective closeness with them that arises through the positive appraisal of their traits and needs (while Miranda shows more negative traits).

However, the network of closeness encompasses further relevant aspects. The most general concern the viewers' *spatio-temporal relationships* to the characters. In the changing character configurations of the film's scenes, Paulina is shown most frequently, for the longest time and most often alone, and she is repeatedly emphasised also through the audiovisual style.⁷ After the prologue, the film begins with her alone; then changing configurations with two characters predominate in the film's first act (Paulina and Gerardo, Gerardo and Miranda, Paulina and Miranda); and from then on the configuration with all three characters. Paulina is thus not only the centre of the action as the protagonist, but also the centre of the cinematic experience, as the viewers are most strongly connected to her across space and time, sharing most situations and actions with her. The fact that the plot begins with her already strengthens the bond with her through psychological primacy and mere-exposure effects.

A second aspect of imaginative closeness concerns the *para-proxemic relationships* to the characters, the impression of being physically close or distant to them in situations that concern them. At first glance, there appear to be similarities in how they are presented. All three characters are shown in close shots as well as in wider shots where they move within a great depth of space (emphasised by camera movements and the use of wide-angle, deep-focus lenses). These stylistic strategies counteract the film's chamber play character, its confinement to one interior setting and a minimal constellation of characters who mostly talk, and they make it easier to read the characters' facial and bodily expressions and let them have an effect. A more precise look at the para-proxemic relationships reveals that Paulina's face is shown more often in close-ups than the faces of the other two characters. In particular, several very close shots emphasise her emotional expressions and create a sympathetic feeling of intimate proximity (except for when she attacks Miranda and appears briefly threatening). In contrast, the camera rarely approaches Gerardo's face to this

7 The differences are not great, but significant: there is only one configuration where Paulina is not present at all (not counting crosscutting), namely when Gerardo tells Miranda to confess. But even then, we know that she is right behind the wall. Gerardo is absent in three scenic configurations, Miranda in four.

extent; it mostly keeps to medium close-ups and thus tends to remain in the zone of 'personal' rather than 'intimate' space (in the terms of anthropological proxemics). Finally, Miranda is portrayed more often from a greater distance in medium shots, and when we see him up close, it is often only from an angle in which his rather rigid facial expressions are even more difficult to interpret. Only occasionally is his suffering as a victim emphasised, for example when Paulina holds a gun to his throat.

Even more important than the impressions of spatial proximity to the characters are the *relationships to their mental perspectives* of perceiving, knowing, wanting, evaluating, and feeling, because these can influence appraisal processes even more strongly. The perceptual perspective in *Death and the Maiden* is mostly that of an external observer. There are relatively few subjective point-of-view shots directly from a character's position, there is no marked subjective sound, and there are no memory flashbacks, dream sequences, or other forms of 'mindscreen'. Generally, the viewers see and hear more than any of the characters, often from an external point of view, maybe that of a judge. Importantly, however, this judging observer is biased, as the camera often approximates the visual perspectives of Paulina and Gerardo (but only rarely that of Miranda) through eyeline matches, over-the-shoulder shots, or shot/reverse shot editing, especially in their dialogues. In terms of their perception of the events, the viewers are therefore closer to Paulina and Gerardo than Miranda. Again, they alternate between the points of view of both characters, but approximate Paulina's somewhat more often, which may subliminally influence their appraisal of the perceived situations. Moreover, the expressive use of stylistic devices creates a dark, threatening atmosphere or mood that corresponds in many respects to Paulina's existential feelings, the way she affectively experiences her world (on film style and existential feelings, see Eder 2016b).

However, the film aligns the viewers' perspectives by no means uniformly with those of a specific character, but rather leads to an effective split. In the main part of the film, the viewers clearly adopt a similar epistemic perspective to Gerardo. His knowledge of Paulina and Miranda's past is nearly as limited as that of the audience, and he remains just as uncertain. This uncertainty also affects Gerardo's evaluative and motivational perspective: he cannot be sure how to judge Paulina and Miranda's actions, wants to find out the truth about what has happened and searches for possible ways out of the situation. The film's puzzle structure repeatedly brings the audience close to these evaluations, desires, and goals. Only knowledge of the past would allow both Gerardo and the audience to make a reasoned assessment of Paulina and Miranda's behaviour, and their appraisals fluctuate with the various pieces of information they receive. In epistemic and motivational terms, therefore, there is the closest proximity to Gerardo and a considerable distance to the other two characters.

Taken together, the following picture of imaginative and affective closeness to the three characters emerges: a relatively great distance is created from Miranda in almost all respects and almost throughout the film. His physicality, psyche, sociality

and behaviour suggest rather negative appraisals and an attitude of diffuse antipathy and suspicion towards him, especially because he could be a torturer and rapist. It would stand to reason that Miranda, as an abused, helpless and possibly innocent prisoner, would at least sometimes evoke empathy or compassion. However, this is counteracted in the film, among other things, by downplaying his suffering or making it appear grotesque due to Paulina's humiliations and his own whining and threatening behaviour. Due to his shackling, he is the least active character, thus not inviting the viewer to imaginatively co-experience his actions. Only rarely do the viewers approach his visual and auditory perception (for example through eyeline matches). In particular, there are few POV shots from the standpoint of Miranda as a helpless captive. Para-proxemically, the viewers are also further removed from him than from the other two characters due to the use of slightly wider shots. While the viewers know almost nothing about the events in the past, he knows everything, but does not (credibly) communicate. While he wants to get free at all costs, the viewers cannot share this goal and his assessment of the situations because his guilt or innocence is not clear. All this means that empathy and compassion for Miranda are reduced or blocked by narrative and audiovisual means. Only at the end does the film establish a certain closeness to him, albeit a disturbing one, as we will see.

In contrast, a far greater imaginative closeness to both Paulina and Gerardo is established, albeit in very different forms and in frequent alternation. Paulina is the protagonist, the centre of action and experience in the film, which revolves around her need to cope with her traumatic past. We meet her right at the beginning and experience the same dark atmosphere as her. Due to her heroic past actions, her vulnerability, her strong and upright personality, and many other positive characteristics, she invites the most favourable appraisal and the strongest sympathy, mostly in the form of compassion for her suffering and respect for her strength and attitude. The audience accompanies her closely through the space and time of the film as she goes through her experiences and also gets close to her para-proxemically through many medium close shots of her body and close-ups of her expressive face. However, her assessment of the situation is not necessarily to be trusted, which also makes her actions and goals questionable. Again and again, her actions seem too aggressive and ruthless, which breaks through the partisanship in her favour and diminishes sympathy with her. First she has the impulse to rape Miranda with a broomstick, then she wants to force him to confess although he might be innocent, and later she even wants to kill him. Although her past history makes her actions understandable, her brutality and cold-bloodedness towards the possibly innocent Miranda are morally unacceptable. Moreover, Paulina's external goals conflict not only with common moral norms, but also with her own inner need to heal from her trauma. She would bring guilt upon herself, jeopardise her partnership with Gerardo and destroy all chances of a future life of contentment and security. For these reasons, the viewers are likely to be in favour of Paulina's inner need, but not her external goals. The film also rarely aims for empathy in the sense of

sharing her dominant emotions; while she feels fear, hatred, anger, despair, or later satisfaction at her violent humiliation of Miranda, the audience is more likely to feel compassion and respect for her, but occasionally also concern or disapproval of her misguided actions.

Gerardo is also a fundamentally likeable character, but the sympathy for him is repeatedly interrupted, in this case by his selfishness, opportunism, dishonesty, and lack of integrity. The narration and the camera keep him at a somewhat greater distance from the audience than Paulina. In other respects, however, the viewers are brought closest to him, especially in terms of knowledge. In this respect, Gerardo is, for most of the film, the proxy for the viewers who, like him, do not know Paulina's and Miranda's past and cannot properly assess the current situation. The viewers will also share some of his central goals (understanding the situation and its backstory, wanting Paulina to heal, avoiding destructive consequences of her violence), as well as his fluctuating appraisal of the events, depending on the emergence of new information (such as about Paulina's rape or Miranda's alleged alibi). In the second act, they are also often close to his affective perspective and experience some emotions that are similar to his, for instance his compassion for the desperate Paulina or his disapproval of her violent actions and statements (albeit not his feelings of guilt towards her).

The structure of imaginative closeness to the three characters is not static, but dynamic, developing in three major steps over the course of the film:

1. The first sequences, when Paulina is alone, establish a high degree of closeness to her. Although the viewers cannot yet understand her motives, they can partly approximate her perceptual and evaluative perspective, experience the same foreboding atmosphere as her, mirror her bodily movements, and begin to sympathise with her.
2. In the main part of the film, from Gerardo's arrival to the climax, the viewers are brought closer to Paulina in some respects (as the most sympathetic character, the protagonist and centre of the experience), and to Gerardo in others (as their proxy in terms of knowledge, desires and feelings), while the distance to Miranda is consistently greater. Moreover, viewers' assessments of the situations and characters change again and again as new information emerges during the course of the plot; sometimes they are led to adopt Paulina's perspective, sometimes Gerardo's; sometimes they are led to take her side and sometimes his.
3. As we will see shortly, the climax and resolution of the film will eventually bring the audience into line with Paulina's mental perspective in decisive respects and re-establish her as the focal point of imaginative closeness and sympathy, while establishing a rather distanced relation to Gerardo. The end of the film also aims at an uncanny, antipathetic, and disturbing form of closeness with Miranda.

The structures of conflict and imaginative closeness outlined so far lay an essential foundation for the characters' *symbolic meanings* and the film's central theme. The film involves the audience in a moral and legal discourse, playing on their moral intuitions and emotions. During the main part of the film, the strategic use of closeness and distance, and particularly the constant splitting and shifting of perspectives, prevents viewers from deciding too quickly on one of the conflicting parties and on a particular answer to the film's thematic questions.⁸ As already indicated, Paulina is involved in two interlinked conflicts. Paulina and Miranda are in a narrative conflict in relation to action and plot: she wants his confession; he refuses it and wants to be released. Paulina and Gerardo, on the other hand, fight out the central conflict of values from opposing evaluative perspectives. As will be argued below, Paulina represents the side of subjective law, vigilante justice, initially apparently the *lex talionis* (an eye for an eye, torture for torture), and later a position of restorative justice. Gerardo represents the side of objective, official law, formal legality, *in dubio pro reo*, human rights, and utilitarian justice. Miranda does not appear as a legal subject, but as a mere object. Figuratively, this position is already indicated by the fact that in the series of shots and counter-shots used to show the confrontation, he sits in the middle between Gerardo and Paulina and below eye level, so that their decisions are literally made above his head. The viewers also alternate spatially between the positions of Gerardo and Paulina, but hardly ever that of Miranda, who is directly affected by the decision.

The decision against vigilante justice and in favour of the law should be easy for the audience, especially as Polanski's film does not seek to arouse a hunger for revenge. In an official trial, reasonable doubt about the guilt of the accused would already be grounds for an acquittal. But the film doesn't make it that easy for the viewers. Firstly, official law would be powerless in the film's conflict situation: even if Miranda were guilty, he would probably never be punished. Secondly, the side of objective law is not free of subjective interests: although Gerardo as a lawyer primarily represents legal norms and human rights, he is also strongly influenced by his own career plans. Thirdly, he only acts on abstract principles and has never experienced torture himself, whereas Paulina acts from the concrete bodily experience of an actual victim. And finally, only through Miranda's participation in the search for truth would there be a chance of Paulina coping with her trauma. Both positions, subjective and objective law, are thus given strong arguments. However, the viewer's experience is not only guided by these content-related arguments of the film narrative, but also by the different relations of closeness to the characters, which are established not least by stylistic means. As the different aspects of imaginative closeness to Paulina and Gerardo are played off against each other, the viewers are invited to take both sides

8 Of course, this strategy also has other functions, too, such as evoking curiosity, suspense and surprise, as well as a diffuse mood of tense disorientation, further intensified by feelings of spatial tightness and anxiety about a bad outcome of the events.

and leave their own evaluative perspective on the conflict largely open.⁹ The film thus aims to create an oscillating partisanship and a deliberative attitude in the audience, which (in combination with the extensive dialogues) lends *Death and the Maiden* its characteristic discursive, argumentative quality.

This process of moral pondering and imagining remains in the foreground until shortly before the film ends. The plot develops as follows: Paulina humiliates Miranda again when he has to urinate. A sudden phone call from the president sets a deadline: the police will come in the morning to protect Gerardo from death threats against him. Paulina announces that she will kill Miranda by then if he does not confess. To save his life, he agrees to the confession (64:00–72:00).

In a second conversation on the veranda (72:00–76:30), Paulina and Gerardo talk about their relationship, about the fact that when Paulina returned from her abduction, she found Gerardo, who thought she was dead, already having an affair with another woman. This reveals a major source of Gerardo's guilt and further effects of Paulina's torture on the couple. He begs Paulina's forgiveness and declares his love for her, and the para-proxemics suggest that the two have grown closer (they are seen in closer shots than before).

In view of Paulina's plan to kill her prisoner, Gerardo now wants Miranda to make a confession, even if merely a fake one, and tells him details of the torture that he knows from Paulina. During the video recording of the confession, however, Miranda speaks in a deliberately forced and artificial manner. When he also mentions a name that suggests he might actually be the torturer, Paulina decides to kill him. But suddenly the power and the lights come back on. Miranda manages to free himself, gains control of the gun and Paulina, tries to force his release, but is overpowered by Paulina and Gerardo, who now act together (81:00–84:30).

While Paulina prepares to kill Miranda, Gerardo desperately tries to verify his alibi, calling the hospital in Spain where the doctor was supposedly working at the time of the torture. Whether you think Miranda is guilty or innocent, this increases suspense (will the innocent die? Or, will the guilty get away?). When Paulina leads her captive to the cliff, Gerardo receives the answer that Miranda was indeed in Spain. He catches up with Paulina at the clifftop, but she believes Miranda's alibi is a fabrication and is determined to push him to his death unless he makes a confession she can believe to be true.

9 To illustrate this, one could imagine in a thought experiment other ways of telling the same story, in each of which the perspective of one character dominates, so that the film cannot put its thematic questions up for discussion: (1) To allow Paulina's perspective to dominate, the agony of her torture could be vividly shown in a flashback, possibly with details that suggest Miranda's guilt. (2) In an action film with a revenge plot, Miranda could be clearly identified as the torturer; the plot would then have to be varied so that he appears as Paulina's powerful, dangerous antagonist. (3) Focusing on Miranda's perspective would also be possible: he could be made more sympathetic by emphasising his positive traits; the audience could share his perceptual, affective and motivational perspective (more subjective shots from his point of view; emphasising his mistreatment, peril and fear); his epistemic perspective could be left open until the end; evidence of his guilt could be withheld, hints of Paulina's possible error emphasised.

Miranda has fallen to his knees in front of her. She takes his head in both hands and asks him, calmly and soberly, to speak to her. 'Didn't you tell me your secrets? Didn't you rape me?' He begins to talk, just as calmly. His confession lasts almost four minutes. Miranda recounts how he initially resisted the temptation to exert power over the victims, who were tied up naked and blindfolded on a table in front of him; how he then succumbed to the temptation and developed a morbid curiosity about their reactions to his violence. How he enjoyed being naked in the glaring light and how he raped Paulina. He closes with the words: 'I loved it. I was sorry it ended'.

After standing frozen for a moment, Gerardo lunges at Miranda and drags him to the edge of the cliff but is then unable to throw him down. Paulina, in contrast, seems composed, even relieved. She unties Miranda's bonds. In a long shot, she and Gerardo slowly walk away, leaving Miranda behind, staring into the depths. A subjective POV shot tilts forwards off the cliff, suggesting his fall. Fade out. (But the film is not over yet.)

16.6 The Characters' Thematic Meanings at the Film's Ending

The character structures analysed so far are likely to elicit largely similar reactions from most contemporary audiences (some possible differences have already been mentioned). However, when it comes to the characters' *symbolic meanings*, the range of reactions and interpretations is likely to widen. Generally, viewers may assume that the characters convey overarching meanings when an interplay of text and context suggests that the beings depicted stand for something else, often something more abstract or general. This can already be sensed during reception or can become conscious and verbalised afterwards. In the case of *Death and the Maiden*, various interpretations of the characters as symbols are possible in this sense. The viewer could assume that Paulina, Gerardo, and Miranda not only have certain traits, but also exemplify them, for example in terms of their personality (strong, weak, authoritarian), psychological disorders (paranoid obsession, narcissistic opportunism, sociopathic sadism), or political views (radical, reformist, reactionary). These attributes could also be considered in their intersectional combination: the female gender could be associated with a strong personality, obsession and radicalism; the male gender with a weak or authoritarian personality, opportunism or sadism, and reformist or reactionary politics. These and other interpretations would be possible, but they are not particularly foregrounded by the film and its contemporary contexts. Strongly emphasised, however, are the social roles of the characters as resistance fighters and henchman of the dictatorship, as survivor of torture and rape and as torturer and rapist. The conflict between Paulina's and Gerardo's ideas of law and justice is brought to the fore particularly clearly. On a contextual level, this emphasis is supported by various discourses, including film promotion, reviews, or statements by the creators. However, the textual structures of the film itself described above are decisive: the exposition and constellation of the three characters, the creation of imaginative and affective closeness to them, and the shaping of their conflicts.

More generally, our case study shows how in narratives the crucial thematic meanings of characters often emerge from the attitudes and values they enact in their central conflicts. Through the development of these conflicts, narratives can raise thematic questions, and through their resolution, accompanied by affective reactions to the characters' fate, they can convey messages about which attitudes are rewarded or punished also in reality, or which values prevail (or should prevail) under certain circumstances. Thus, although films and their characters are fundamentally multi-thematic and polysemic, structures of narrative and style generally constrain and prioritise their range of possible meanings, directing them towards certain focal points. In the case of *Death and the Maiden*, this is so pronounced that one could speak of a didactic approach (also in a positive sense).

The following analysis therefore concentrates on the characters' thematic meanings arising from their central conflicts. It goes beyond the first version of this book by taking into account the interpretation of law scholar and journalist Orit Kamir (2005), who has come to partly similar conclusions and offers interesting extensions. Kamir analyses *Death and the Maiden* as a central example to illustrate her approach of 'law-and-film'. According to her, the social discourses of law and film are interrelated and together shape collective ideas about crucial values and norms in culture and society. 'Law films' represent legal systems and conflicts, pass 'cinematic judgement' on them, and involve viewers emotionally. By way of that, they comment on legal issues in reality and offer an—often enlightening—form of 'popular jurisprudence' with a potentially wide reach (Kamir 2005: 27–31).

Kamir's detailed and insightful interpretation of *Death and the Maiden* indicates that she takes the meanings and discourses of law films to be centred on their characters. Similar to my analysis above, she comes to the conclusion that the film's narration and visual style lead the 'implied viewer' to a 'double' or 'split identification' with Paulina on the one hand and Gerardo on the other, who represent different conceptions of law. Kamir regards the conflict between Paulina and Gerardo primarily as one between formal, abstract, official law, which aims to ensure the uninterrupted functioning of society, and the concrete, specific and affective law of victims, who long for liberation from their traumas. Moreover, she emphasises how the film connects these approaches to law with gender:

Death and the Maiden's explicit association of a formalistic, positivistic notion of law with a male character, while it links a more compassionate, humanistic form with a female character clearly genders these two concepts along familiar lines, invoking a jurisprudence featuring a feminist ethics of compassion and care. Gerardo's 'masculine' perception claims to be neutral, objective, pragmatic, utilitarian, professional, and free of emotional biases. In comparison, Paulina's law is one through which a wronged person can claim and regain her personhood and dignity. Further, it is law that employs and applies intuition, compassion, trust and personal commitment. In order for law to be good and just it must demonstrate empathy and care for her, convey and facilitate faith, and encourage and empower her to speak her truth. (Kamir 2005: 42–43)

By the end of the film at the latest, according to Kamir, the 'implied viewer' is clearly drawn to Paulina's side and made to share her view of justice without reservation (leading to the film's 'cinematic judgement'):

Throughout the film, the viewer is invited to respectfully consider, compare and critique both presented notions of law and justice at face value. The film's ending pronounces its unreserved condemnation of the legalistic vision of law as 'objective' and 'neutral' and therefore impartial and just. The film leaves its implied viewer little room for doubt that such conceptualization of law is a smoke screen, disguising personal, completely subjective fears, human deficiencies, and selfish interests. It is Paulina's bold, honest, and courageous pursuit of healing justice, which professes her subjective grounds, motivations and biases, that the film celebrates and embraces. Paulina's course of action perhaps cannot secure a comprehensive, coherent system of objective judgment, but it is possible that it does constitute as good as law and justice are ever likely to get. The film seems to leave the viewer who identifies with Gerardo few means to save face.

But the film's implied viewer also deeply identifies with Paulina, thus also experiencing her redemption and relief. The viewer feels just in identifying with Paulina, and greatly relieved that the process of testimony creation, in which s/he actively shared, has been shown to be truthful and accurate. Further, the viewer is relieved that Paulina did not execute Roberto, that her lack of compassion for Roberto and her overwhelming, frightening, and embarrassing desire for vengeance, a desire that the viewer may have, at times, viscerally experienced, was redeemed and transformed into the pursuit of truth and justice. (Kamir 2005: 63)

Kamir's thorough interpretation and her explanations of the relations between different conceptions of justice and the victims' coping with trauma offer important insights. In many ways, her analysis and mine are mutually supportive. However, my model of character analysis also allows for some clarifications and suggests different conclusions in some respects. Unlike Kamir, I do not assume a uniform 'implied viewer' but rather a larger (though not arbitrary) set of likely interpretations by audiences with partly different dispositions. Furthermore, instead of vague and one-dimensional concepts of 'identification', I refer to the network of affective involvement with characters, imaginative closeness to them and mental perspective-taking, which allows for a wider range of spectatorial responses and enables a more nuanced analysis. Thirdly, Kamir's interpretation does not, in my opinion, take enough account of the development of the characters and their ideas of justice over the course of the film. Finally, it does not address the twist of thematic meaning that unfolds in the film's epilogue.

Kamir assumes that Gerardo represents a formalistic, Paulina a therapeutic conception of justice, and that the latter prevails in the end, which the film signals by dissolving identification with Gerardo and making the implied viewer identify strongly with Paulina. However, a closer analysis reveals a more complex picture, and while I essentially agree with Kamir's observation that the resolution of the film confirms Paulina's moral and legal position, I would describe differently how this is done.

In the course of the film, both Paulina's and Gerardo's ideas of justice change as they influence each other through their interactions. Paulina begins with an impulse

of *vengeful justice* (rape, humiliation, injury, killing), but later takes an approach of *restorative justice* (letting the perpetrator live if he confesses truthfully). Gerardo starts with a version of *retributive justice* (the perpetrator should be punished by the state in proportion to the legal principle he has violated), but gradually tends towards a form of *utilitarian justice* that takes the perspective of the victim more into account (the perpetrator should be treated in a way that reduces suffering and increases benefit, both for the victim and society). In the end, he falls back into an impulse of vengeful justice, but then cannot or does not want to realise it and instead follows Paulina's decision. In the end, her position of restorative justice prevails: the perpetrator should take responsibility for his harmful actions in a confrontation with the victim, so that the victim is empowered, her agency is strengthened and her suffering reduced.

Most of the time, viewers did not know whether they can really trust Paulina's promise that she will release Miranda after a truthful confession. In the end, however, she fulfils this promise, although Miranda's statements are extremely disturbing. When he confesses his atrocities, explaining why he committed them and how his sadistic desire for sexual violence developed, he offers no reparation and shows no remorse, even explicitly admitting that he would rape Paulina again. Nevertheless, she releases him and appears calmer, relieved. His confession evidently has a healing effect on her. The film suggests that she has gained something important through Miranda's questioning: she has been empowered, has been able to act and express herself, and as a result has regained situational control, emotional stability, self-determination, autonomy and ultimately freedom and agency in her everyday life. The audience can assume that although her trauma can never be completely overcome, she will now be better able to deal with it. As the protagonist in the film's central conflict, Paulina thus achieves her central goal: certainty and healing through Miranda's confession. Her inner need is at least partially satisfied, her suffering is alleviated, and she is largely relieved of her paranoid obsession. By letting Miranda live, she doesn't put murder on her shoulders and preserves the prospect of a better future life. Moreover, after Gerardo has gradually developed a better understanding of Paulina's past and perspective and finally accepted her decision, the couple is reunited and leave the cliff together.

The conflict development thus leads the viewers to a resolution that is likely to correspond to their previous wishes (see above) and to evoke positive appraisals and affects (including moral emotions). Moreover, the film establishes an intense imaginative closeness to Paulina in this scene and makes the viewers share her evaluative, motivational and affective perspective to a much larger degree (while Gerardo's perspective recedes into the background and a distance to it is created). This is achieved, among other things, by audiovisual forms that lighten the mood and atmosphere of the film and thus suggest a change in Paulina's existential feelings of being in the world. Musically, the scene is quietly accompanied by Paulina's elegiac leitmotif, and with the morning light, brightness returns to her world.



Fig. 59 and Fig. 60 Paulina Escobar and Roberto Miranda at the climax of *Death and the Maiden*. (Dir. Roman Polanski, *Death and the Maiden*, 1994, Capitol Films/Channel Four Films, USA/UK/France. All rights reserved.)

The shot/reverse shot editing alternates between Paulina's and Miranda's point of view and the expression on their faces in close-up. When Paulina asks Miranda to talk to her, her face is unnaturally brightly lit and seen slightly from below, from Miranda's perspective (Figure 59). It contrasts with the divided background of the morning landscape: below, the land is black, above, the sky is bright. This is one of the atmospheric 'felt' landscapes mentioned before; as a visual metaphor it conveys that Paulina's spirit is also becoming lighter and brighter. Miranda's face, seen from Paulina's visual perspective, is also framed by a landscape, but a contrasting one: the

sea, as it crashes again and again against the dark cliffs, subliminally suggesting the natural force of evil (Figure 60). After Paulina and Gerardo have left Miranda standing at the edge of the cliff, his gaze tips into the depths.

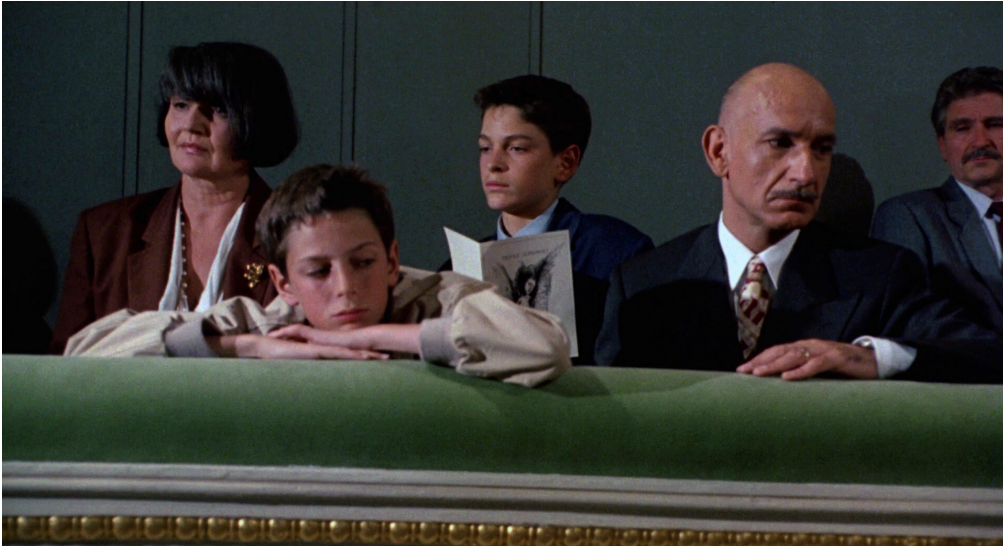


Fig. 61 Miranda among his family, looking at Paulina, in the epilogue of *Death and the Maiden*. (Dir. Roman Polanski, *Death and the Maiden*, 1994, Capitol Films/Channel Four Films, USA/UK/France. All rights reserved.)

The film could now end with the suicide of the perpetrator, Paulina's coping with her trauma and her reunion with Gerardo—but it doesn't. Its epilogue brings formal closure, but a new twist of thematic meaning (94:20–99:00). The concert from the frame story at the beginning of the film resumes. In an elaborate crane shot, the camera swings through the concert hall towards Gerardo and Paulina, who are sitting in the middle of the audience just as tense as at the beginning of the film. After a moment Paulina looks up to the right. Her look pauses, she shows an expression of disbelief. The camera pans, following her gaze into a box. Miranda is sitting there with his wife and two sons, aged about ten to twelve. Looking away from the string quartet, he stares at Paulina for several seconds with a rigid, empty, enigmatic look, until his younger son notices this and turns to his father (Figure 61). Miranda smiles, puts his hand on his son's head, caresses him, and lets his hand rest on the boy's hair. Then he turns his gaze back to Paulina as if hypnotised. Now Gerardo has also seen Miranda. He looks upward with a dark expression, then at Paulina, then they both look straight ahead, petrified and gloomy. 'We'll have to live with him', Paulina said to Gerardo before. She was right. The villain's stereotypical suicide did not take place after all, the camera's look going over the cliff was a lie. The concert situation has become a limit situation (*Grenzsituation*): the victims and the torturers remain shackled to each other even after the confession and even in the company of other people. There is no such thing as liberation from the past for either the survivors or the perpetrators of violence, says this dance of death of the looks between them.

The epilogue of *Death and the Maiden* qualifies the previous positive resolution of the conflict: Paulina and Gerardo must continue to live alongside her torturer who shows no remorse and is not prosecuted, and their encounters with him are agonising. In reality, too, countless people are forced to live alongside their tormentors and murderers of their loved ones (which is captured impressively by documentary films such as *The Look of Silence*, which examines the aftermath of the mass murders of 'communists' in Indonesia). In Chile after the military regime or in South Africa after apartheid, truth and reconciliation commissions also tried to deal with this by pursuing an approach of restorative justice. The individual interpersonal conflict of the characters in *Death and the Maiden* thus refers to broader societal situations in reality.

The characters' thematic meanings not only concern different conceptions of justice. Among other things, another important thread of meaning is dedicated to the question of evil, closely associated with the character of Miranda. The first part of the film explored the *effects of evil* through a puzzle structure that focused the audience's attention on how the torture affected Paulina's life and her relationship with Gerardo. Her traumatised behaviour was conspicuous precisely because her motives could only be guessed at. The second and main part of the film, after Miranda's capture, continued this theme of the consequences of evil and answered some questions of the first part: suffering and loss are expressed cinematically and in Paulina's behaviour, and are explicitly addressed in the dialogues. The second part also brings up the new theme of *how to deal with evil*, juxtaposing the evaluative perspectives of Paulina and Gerardo and using a sophisticated structure of imaginative closeness to keep a decision open. The question of Miranda's guilt faded into the background here; the central question was how to deal with a suspect whose guilt was probable but not proven. As we have seen, this section of the film delved into the moral question of what kind of justice—vengeful, retributive, utilitarian, restorative—might be appropriate to deal with evil. With Miranda's confession at the film's climax, the issue of the *causes of evil* comes to the fore. The banal causes are quickly and vividly conveyed: the dehumanisation of the victims as 'flesh on the table', the sadistic exercise of power and self-affirmation ('I owned you!'), the fulfilment of repressed desires, and the pleasure of breaking taboos ('I liked being naked'). Miranda's confession also refers back to his traits shown earlier in the film. While they were drinking together, Gerardo asked him what he gets from a woman. The answer: 'I get my balls cut off'. 'Your balls, that's what keeps you coming back?' 'Sure. I want them back'. These self-deprecating sentences reflect Miranda's fear of castration, his experienced loss of power, and correspond to his uninhibited confession of sadistic pleasure in violence: 'I was sorry it ended'. Miranda knows what he has done, and he has been aware of it the whole time.

In his lectures on ethics, the philosopher Ernst Tugendhat speaks of people with a 'lack of moral sense', who have exorcised moral feelings for the sake of their own advantages. Such people can be 'moral free riders': they can disguise themselves as moral by strategically calculating the moral emotions of others—approval

and disapproval, shame, resentment, remorse, respect, happiness about morally good conduct—into their own behaviour and pretending to have them themselves (Tugendhat 1993: 310ff.). In this way, they can be loved and respected by others, but can still act immorally when they choose to, when nobody notices and they cannot be called to account.

Miranda is such a man with a lack of moral sense, and he also illustrates the price paid by those who place themselves outside the moral order: emptied relationships and an emotionally impoverished life. Miranda is only able to act strategically, calculatingly, his moral emotions are never real and spontaneous. His continuous disguise turns him into a personality whose real dealings with people become deeply distorted, and his social and emotional life becomes cold and dead. This becomes visible in his behaviour to Gerardo at the beginning of the film, to his family in the epilogue, and to society as a whole. Miranda lives a constant lie. The confession forces him to reveal his only true emotion—his sadistic pleasure. Kingsley portrays this brilliantly. His acting changes fundamentally, the facial expressions become more relaxed. Only now can the previous pretence and Miranda's inner tension be felt to its full extent. The moment when his previously hidden motivational and affective perspective emerges is staged like a perverse scene of empathy, forcing viewers into an uncanny proximity to him.

Together with the audience, Paulina also understands Miranda's self-destruction as a moral person and can let him go. In the course of the film, both she and Gerardo have undergone profound developments in their personalities and their relationship (*character arcs*). Paulina takes decisive steps to overcome her trauma. At the beginning of the film, her personality and everyday life were characterised by despair, bitterness, paranoid fear and existential disruption, to the point of losing her sense of self ('I don't exist'). By the end, she has found a grim acceptance of the past as well as greater security and emotional stability for the future. Gerardo, in turn, finally learns to understand Paulina and her traumatic experiences better, is closer to her and is more willing to support her. Miranda alone shows no development in his personality and no insight or remorse. He remains stuck in the role of the eternal perpetrator, the man with a lack of moral sense and a distorted emotional life devoid of social connection.

16.7 The Characters as Artefacts and Their Mediality in Film and Theatre

So far, the focus of my analysis was on Paulina, Gerardo, and Miranda as represented persons and as symbols. Their qualities as artefacts, and particularly the concrete cinematic means shaping them, were taken into account primarily insofar as they contribute to their diegetic and symbolic dimensions. Of course, this is only one possible analytical focus (others could concentrate, for example, more on the audiovisual form), but it is one that seemed adequate to the film's emphasis on conflict, discourse,

and ethics. Nevertheless, I hope that the case study also indicates how representation and form are interwoven and that the focus on one as well as the other can be justified.¹⁰

Some properties of the characters as *artefacts* that have emerged in this study are crucial to their aesthetic experience and evaluation. At the most concrete level, various means of cinematic style create a distinctive sensory experience. These include the individual voices, bodies and movements in the believable and nuanced performances of actors Sigourney Weaver, Ben Kingsley, and Stuart Wilson; the intelligent play with their star images and role histories; the creation of a dark atmosphere and soulscape through scenography and lighting; the visual movement through camerawork and editing that enlivens the claustrophobic space, subtly emphasises the expressive performances of the actors and provides surprise or intensification; and the use of mood music and leitmotifs to bring the audience closer to the inner lives of the characters. Regarding the narrative structures, it is particularly important that crucial information about Paulina's and Miranda's personality and past is withheld for a long time and only conveyed in fragments or in unreliable hints. We only learn what Paulina had to go through in the middle of the film through her dialogues with Miranda and Gerardo. And that she is not mentally deranged, but that Miranda is in fact an unrepentant torturer and rapist, only becomes clear through his confession at the end of the film. This enigma structure creates uncertainty and intensifies attention and curiosity. As for their general artefact qualities, the characters are distinguished by realism, individualisation, multidimensionality, complexity, consistency and dynamism. They largely defy narrative or social stereotypes and lend the film its thematic depth. At the most general level, that of overarching character conceptions, *Death and the Maiden* does not simply follow one set of aesthetic conventions, but combines several of them in an original and effective way. On the one hand, the characters conform to mainstream realism in their comprehensibility, activity, goal-directedness, emotionality, and conflictuality. On the other hand, they correspond to independent realism in that their motives and personalities are only gradually revealed in their psychological complexity, their conflicts are primarily internal and

10 I am writing this, because some have misunderstood the theory developed in the first edition of this book as being limited to a focus on representation and not taking into account the role of medium, form, and style in the temporal emergence and experience of characters (e.g., Hochschild 2023). Against this, I refer to my detailed discussions of these matters in Chapters 3 to 8. The analytical focus on characters, representation, and narration is sometimes generally dismissed by some schools of film theory (especially neo-phenomenological and Deleuzian ones in Germany), because they suspect it of neglecting cinematic mediality, audiovisual form, and viewers' sensory-affective experience. Such theories have made valuable contributions to the study of stylistic subtleties and aesthetic experiences, but their critical arguments are, in my view, unjustified in their generality and often go hand in hand with a neglect of narrative, representational, and symbolic-thematic aspects in their own analytical practice. In contrast to this, I would like to point out the importance of these aspects. Among other things, the significance of their analysis lies in the fact that it aggregates various stylistic-formal observations at a higher level of abstraction. This is also reflected in the production process, in which many creative decisions about style (e.g., by directors of photography or editors) are motivated and guided by decisions about representation and narration (e.g., by screenwriters or directors).

their actions are primarily linguistic. And finally, due to the strong orientation towards ethical reflection and argumentation in their conflicts and dialogues, the characters also partly correspond to conventions of allegory or parable.

Taken together, these qualities of the characters as artefacts fulfil many common criteria for a positive aesthetic evaluation, and indeed most critics praised the film. Isolated critical voices, also focusing on the characters, found fault above all with the way Dorfman's play was adapted. Literary scholar Richard A. Morace criticised the casting of Sigourney Weaver in the role of Paulina because he did not find the white US-American star credible as a Latin American dissident (Morace 2000: 150–51). According to him, her star image distracted the audience's attention from the political significance of the story. Similarly, he is critical of the striking correspondences between the characters and the biography of star director Polanski, which will be discussed below.

A comparison between Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden* and Polanski's film adaptation reveals far-reaching differences in the *mediality* of the characters as artefacts, only some of which can be selectively outlined here. As the text of the play only defines roles, the characters are materialised by the actors during the specific performances and are correspondingly mutable. At the premiere in London in 1991, directed by Lindsay Posner, Juliet Stevenson played the role of Paulina, Bill Paterson Gerardo, and Michael Byrne Miranda. At the Broadway premiere in 1992, directed by Mike Nichols, Paulina was played by Glenn Close, Gerardo by Richard Dreyfuss, and Miranda by Gene Hackman. Subsequent regional premieres, for example in India and Iran, were again staged with a different cast. The actors in all such performances are very different in terms of their physicality and acting style, and the directors' approach often seems to have been very different too (Morace (2000) praised the London world premiere, but slated the Broadway premiere with its Hollywood star cast). While the film presents a finished world for an immersive experience, the artificiality and live nature of theatre provides suspense, surprise, and variation at the artefact level; the actors can improvise, make mistakes and catch themselves again.

Characters in theatre also meet a demographically different audience with different expectations in a different social, spatial, and medial constellation (or *dispositif*). On the theatre stage, actors typically stand at a relatively constant distance several metres away from the audience and are thus largely limited in their expression to their voice, large gestures, and movements of their entire body. In contrast, as described above, the film makes full use of media-specific strategies for creating imaginative closeness to the characters through camerawork, editing and other audiovisual means. For example, close-ups suggest intimate physical closeness, make nuances of facial expressions visible (hands clenching together, tears in the corners of the eyes, a forced smile, an absent blink), and evoke corresponding affects; POV editing approximates the characters' perceptual perspectives, showing what they see and how they see it; 'scenes of empathy' invite simulating their affective perspective; and so on.

As we have seen, Paulina is the character with whom such cinematic devices create the

most intense closeness. The film strengthens her position in many respects compared to the theatre play. From the outset, it expresses her perceptual and affective perspective much more strongly than the stage directions in the theatre text envisage. Moreover, Polanski and the two screenwriters made numerous changes to the plot, which have a strong effect on the affective involvement with the characters, especially with Paulina, and on their thematic significance. The biggest change concerns the end of the story. Here the film makes it unmistakably clear that Paulina's suspicions were justified all along: Miranda confesses his atrocities as a torturer and rapist. At the end of the play, however, it remains open whether he is really guilty or whether his confession was only forced. The question of whether Paulina kills Miranda or sets him free, which is crucial for the conflict resolution, the moral evaluation and the thematic message, also remains open in the original play: in contrast to the film, it does not show clearly that she sets him free. In the epilogue, Miranda appears to Paulina only like a ghost or a tormenting vision, not as a living person as in the film. All this leads to greater ambiguity in the play. Furthermore, it aims to force the spectators to reflect further on the moral and legal conflict through deliberate distancing and artificiality: at the end, a stage direction stipulates that a mirror be literally held up to the audience.

However one may evaluate these deviations of the film from the play, in any case they do work towards strengthening the audience's closeness and sympathy with Paulina, towards a more positive moral appraisal and thematic function. So even if, as Morace claims, Sigourney Weaver's star image might detract from the political significance of her character, other strategies in the film enhance this character and reinforce her political and moral significance (or clarify it in a distinctive way). However, Morace mentions a second point of criticism: the conspicuous correspondences of the film's characters and themes to Polanski's biography. As the following analysis of the symptomatic dimension will show, this criticism is much more valid.

16.8 Symptomatology, Evaluation, and the Weight of Reality

So far, the analysis has outlined the intricate ways in which *Death and the Maiden* shapes its characters and their experience as represented beings, artefacts and symbols. The focus lay on the probable reception of Western middle-class target audiences in the mid-1990s, which is likely to largely overlap with the intended reception, or the reception of an 'implied viewer', on these levels. Numerous reviews of the film and other documents suggest that at the time of its release, most viewers focused their attention on these dimensions of the characters and experienced them in similar ways. Moreover, the character structures discussed so far seem to justify a positive aesthetic and ethical appraisal.

Many approaches to character analysis in literary, film, and media studies would stop here: they would limit themselves to analysing characters as represented beings and artefacts, and sometimes also as symbols. Leading researchers have even warned against going further and entering the messy, dangerous terrain of *symptomatic interpretation* (see Chapter 11 and Chapter 12). Contrary to that, I have argued that we have to work this

terrain as well if we want to understand characters adequately and comprehensively, because the viewers' experience of characters is embedded in extratextual reality and shaped by sociocultural discourses about their causes and effects. Today, in times of social media and huge fan communities, this symptomatic level of characters and their experience has become ever more important. Any kind of contextual information, from the creators' biographies to details of a film's production to political contexts to debates about specific ideological issues, can and will be looked up on the Internet, if the audience is interested in them. This will often happen already during watching the film.

To be clear: the concept of symptomatic interpretation proposed here is not about the intended meaning of characters, but about their perceived extratextual causality—about why they are the way they are and what effects they (could) have on their audiences and society. Moreover, it is less about how characters should be experienced at this level than about how they are *de facto* experienced by professional and nonprofessional audiences (and how this again may influence how the other three dimensions of characters are experienced). It is about description, not prescription. The question is neither which understanding of the characters was intended, nor which one imposes itself on the basis of the work alone, nor which one is justified. Rather, the central question is which (often speculative) ideas relevant audience groups develop about character causality, or which ideas are probable in view not only of the film itself, but also of contextual information and audience dispositions concerned. In short, the aim is to explore the actual or probable ways certain audiences experience characters as symptoms. Such experiences are based on different perceived causes or effects of the characters as well as on different audience dispositions, for instance in terms of knowledge, values, or political attitudes. Therefore, it is very likely that responses to characters as symptoms diverge even further from each other than responses to the characters as symbols. (Of course, such audience reactions could also be investigated empirically, for example by means of surveys, interviews, or experiments. However, in my view, a prior analysis of the kind outlined in this chapter would be necessary to develop suitable research questions, categories, and hypotheses for such empirical investigations. Otherwise, there would be a significant risk of overlooking the most important factors and reactions.)

The case of *Death and the Maiden* allows one to gain a better understanding of how, why, and when certain symptomatic interpretations of characters come about, and how the viewers' knowledge about characters' extratextual causes and effects changes their experience. As we will see, symptomatic interpretation can enhance the value of characters, but it can also damage or poison it. Biographical interpretations show this with particular clarity.

But let us first briefly consider some other possible foci of symptomatic interpretation in *Death and the Maiden*. I am not aware of any evidence on *actual or perceived effects* of the characters on their audience. It is conceivable that they have influenced the attitudes of some viewers, for instance in states in transition from a military regime to democracy.

The structures of the characters analysed so far—as represented beings, artefacts and symbols—suggest this possibility. Kamir (2005) also expresses the hope that the film could influence the attitudes of viewers towards traumatised rape survivors and towards certain conceptions of justice. However, such influences on the formation of political attitudes or social identities depend on complex post-film discourses and interactions, which in this case can hardly be reconstructed.

Moving from the effects of the characters to their *causes*, it is first likely that certain *sociocultural* discourses shaped their production and influence their reception. Survivors (or perpetrators) of the regimes in Chile or Argentina are likely to understand and experience the characters differently than viewers with limited knowledge of South American politics and history (including political persecution, *desaparecidos*, torture prisons and exile). In terms of their gender roles, the characters are influenced by social stereotypes in some respects (men want a career, women want children; husbands complain about their wives), but they also resist gender stereotypes in other, arguably more significant ways: the male characters are weaker and less active and aggressive than the female protagonist, who deviates widely from conventional notions of the soft, passive, and caring woman. However, the casting is in line with widespread social discrimination against ethnic groups in the global Northwest: none of the three South American characters are played by a Latino actor. More specific conditions of the medium also influence the genesis of the characters: for example, during film production, Judy Davis, Angelica Huston, and Michelle Pfeiffer were all considered for the role of Paulina, but for practical and strategic reasons, Sigourney Weaver was eventually chosen (Morace 2000: 148–49).

These and many other starting points for symptomatic interpretations of the characters in *Death and the Maiden* are conceivable. However, another aspect seems to be even more important in this case: biography. In film criticism, biographical interpretations of Polanski's films and characters have long abounded. Often they describe inter- or transtextual relationships between the characters and recurring motifs in Polanski's work (e.g., Jacke 2010). In the case of *Death and the Maiden*, for example, these are motifs such as fragile identities, dangerous intruders, seemingly harmless citizens as brutal offenders, unstable power relations, perpetrator-victim relationships and their reversal. The director's extreme life story as a Holocaust survivor, Polish US immigrant, star director, widower of the murdered Sharon Tate, rapist of a minor, and exiled fugitive invited critics and laypeople alike to look for parallels between the characters and the auteur filmmaker's biography. Critic Adrian Martin observes: 'Polanski has always ruled out a direct, autobiographical correlation between his life and his films. ... And yet it is impossible not to see a great deal of his work as a dreamlike transformation of these first-hand experiences of modern evil and trauma' (Martin 2016). Usually, such biographical interpretations focus on the characters, both in positive and negative ways. For example, Orit Kamir sees Polanski's biographical background as enriching thematic meaning:

In *Death and the Maiden*, Polanski allows us to enter his own tormented life as a trauma survivor, an aggressor and a guilt-ridden bystander, and to experience the claustrophobic horror it entails. It is from this painful perspective we are presented with social and jurisprudential questions regarding memory, truth, law and reconciliation. This humbling experience invites us to reconsider fundamental notions of justice, dignity, humanity and life itself. (Kamir 2005: 70)

In contrast, Robert A. Morace observes in his scathing critique that

Polanski was in danger of upstaging the play, less in terms of his direction than his personality. For who was Paulina (in the minds of many of the film's viewers, especially those familiar with Lawrence Weschler's feature article on Polanski which had appeared in the *New Yorker* a few weeks before the film's release) but Polanski the famous filmmaker, the young Jew in Nazi-occupied Poland and later the tormented husband of Sharon Tate ... ? And who was Miranda but the persecuted Polanski charged with statutory rape, forced to flee the United States and protest his innocence from abroad? (Morace 2000: 149)

Both quotes show how biographical contexts and sociocultural discourses can profoundly shape the viewers' experience of a work and its characters. What is significant here is that these discourses, and thus the knowledge and perception of the audience, change over time, which can have a strong impact on how they experience characters (from the formation of mental models to affective involvement to the development of symbolic meanings). The fact that Polanski drugged and abused thirteen-year-old Samantha Gailey in 1977 is proven and undisputed, but for decades this rape hardly played a role in public and professional discourse. After Polanski's escape to Europe, Gailey (now Geimer) was stigmatised in years of legal proceedings as an eternal victim and repeatedly dragged into the public eye, even though she had agreed to an out-of-court settlement with Polanski in 1993 in order to finally find peace (Geimer, Silver, and Newman 2014). At the same time, Polanski's rape was generally ignored, cast in question, downplayed, or excused by other filmmakers, cultural elites, journalists, or ordinary viewers. From a critical perspective, Claire Dederer concisely summarises their (and her own) excuses: 'sex between grown men and teenage girls was normalized at the time, the subject matter of songs and films; Gailey has said she forgives him; Polanski himself was a victim, his mother murdered at Auschwitz, his father held in concentration camps, his wife and unborn child murdered by the Manson Family' (Dederer 2024: 5–6). In most award decisions, film reviews, and presumably in the experience of most viewers, Polanski's rape simply did not get any attention. When he was temporarily arrested in Switzerland in 2009 and his extradition to the USA was discussed, more than one hundred leading producers, directors and actors signed petitions calling for his release. However, the arrest also sparked a controversial debate in the media, and several other women accused Polanski of sexual assault. By the end of the 2010s, his public image had changed fundamentally, mainly due to the #MeToo movement and its enormous public attention. In 2018, Polanski was expelled from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

This change in the public discourse surrounding Polanski also had far-reaching effects on the perception of his films and characters. For example, both film producer Marie Therese Guirgis in her blog post 'Loving Movies in the Age of #MeToo' (2020) and journalist Claire Dederer in her book *Monsters: What Do We Do with Great Art by Bad People?* (2024) vividly describe the irresolvable conflict between their long-term admiration of Polanski's films as artistic masterpieces and their revulsion at the director himself, which covers their experience of his films like an affective mould. Guirgis states: 'I've always separated the artist from the art. But so many women I respect had been telling me for months that I shouldn't any longer. It's one thing to disagree with those women, but to hold on to the work of a pedophile rapist?' (Guirgis 2020). Dederer has dedicated her entire book to the question of how to deal with artistic masterpieces created by morally culpable people. Her list includes many (predominantly male) artists, such as Woody Allen, Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, and others. But her central example is Polanski:

There is no other contemporary figure who balances these two forces so equally: the absoluteness of the monstrosity and the absoluteness of the genius. Polanski made *Chinatown*, often called one of the greatest films of all time. Polanski drugged and anally raped thirteen-year-old Samantha Gailey. There the facts sit, unreconcilable. How would I maintain myself between these contradictions? (Dederer 2024: 6–7)

With phenomenological precision, she describes how her experience of the works changes as a result: 'as I watched, I couldn't ignore something that seemed disturbingly akin to a twinge. More than a twinge, truth be told. My conscience was bothering me. The specter of Polanski's crime wouldn't leave the room' (Dederer 2024: 6). Due to the great media attention on the Polanski case, it is to be expected that many of today's viewers will feel similarly; Dederer's book was a bestseller.

In all likelihood, with the public discourse about Polanski, many viewers' perception of his characters has changed considerably. In 2005, Orit Kamir praised *Death and the Maiden* as a resolutely feminist film and attributed this primarily to the character of Paulina as a rape survivor:

This allegory forcefully asserts that a raped woman is a member of a discriminated group; that raped women are a part of a terrorized, subjected population; that rape is a political crime, perpetrated under patriarchal regimes; that legal systems are inherently reluctant to acknowledge rape, its victims and aggressors, to prosecute and to expose the system and interests behind the individuals. Study of reluctant legal systems following tyrannical dictatorship is, thus, also study of legal systems' treatment of rape victims. ... *Death and the Maiden* places its viewer in Paulina's position as sole possessor of the power to look and judge, while, at the same time, subjecting the viewer, together with the men on the screen, to Paulina's penetrating scrutiny and demand for feminine justice. ... in the film's cinematic judgment, both men, together with the implied viewer, are judged, together with the implied viewer, by Paulina. (Kamir 2005: 47–48)

My previous analysis of Paulina as a represented being, artefact, and symbol supports Kamir's view. At this point, however, the importance of analysing characters also as *symptoms* becomes apparent. In *Death and the Maiden* we seem to be dealing with the paradoxical case of a rapist telling a story about rape with a feminist attitude. This raises a host of questions that cannot be properly answered here: How may the knowledge of Polanski's rape change the viewers' experience of the three characters and their relationships to his biography? Do viewers wonder if Polanski sees himself as Paulina, as Gerardo, as Miranda, or as all three at once? Do they think about what Polanski, the rapist, wanted to imply? Does the film express the unresolvable guilt and inner conflict that continue to run through his life? Or might it be 'a calculated attempt on Polanski's part "to control, sway and otherwise manipulate public thinking" in order to win a reprieve from the California state court and thus end an exile that had proven costly to him both financially and artistically' (Morace 2000: Fn 6, quoting Davis 1995)?

Each of these speculations would lead to a significant change in the perception and interpretation of the characters. Under the condition of earlier public discourses, Paulina appears as an impressive female protagonist with a feminist theme, played by the strong actress Sigourney Weaver, artfully staged, anchored in important political events and in Polanski's biography as a Holocaust survivor and widower of a murder victim. In the light of more recent discourses, Paulina might be perceived instead as an instrument of self-interrogation or self-justification of Polanski, the rapist. If viewers react in this way, they are unlikely to be open to the character's sympathetic traits and thematic meanings. Instead, affective reactions of disapproval, aversion, moral disgust and outrage on the symptomatic level are more likely to come to the fore, disrupting the experience of the character as a represented being and as a symbol. Consequently, the director's ethical flaw also leads to an aesthetic flaw in his work, which has an impact on its moral and aesthetic evaluation. In his discussion of the relationship between art and ethics, the philosopher Noël Carroll outlines the perspective of 'moderate moralism' as follows:

Many (most?) artworks prescribe emotional responses. Some of these emotional responses contain, among their warranting conditions, moral considerations (in the way that anger requires the perception of injustice); and some of these emotional responses are moral through and through (for example, a feeling of social indignation). An artwork that fails to secure emotional uptake is aesthetically defective on its own terms. Moreover, an artwork may fail to secure the emotional responses it mandates because its portrayal of certain characters or situations fails to fit the moral warranting criteria appropriate to the mandated emotion. And one way it can fail to do this is by being immoral. (Carroll 2000: 377)

I would argue that *Death and the Maiden* is a related, but different case: the ethical failure here is not in the work, nor is it in its creation process (a possibility examined by Hjort 2022). Rather, it lies in the biography and personality of its author, which, mediated through public discourse, adversely affects the aesthetic experience of the

audience.¹¹ In this way, immoral creators can ultimately damage the legacy of their own work. However artistically successful a work and its characters may be, however sophisticated their forms, however profound their meanings, all of this can be poisoned, devalued, or destroyed by its creation and context. Even the decision to watch a film can already depend on that. As we have seen, knowledgeable viewers like Dederer and Guirgis did indeed react in this way.

Of course, this is not the only possible response at the symptomatic level. Other viewers, for instance, might associate the film and its characters less with the director than with his co-creators. Taking into account the co-authorship of the writer Ariel Dorfman, who invented the characters, or the actress Sigourney Weaver, who embodied Paulina, would probably lead to more positive reactions. It is likely that Dorfman's political biography made the characters in his play more interesting and credible to many viewers. A socialist, he worked for the government of Salvador Allende as a cultural adviser and was forced into exile by Pinochet's bloody military coup in 1973. Companions he had to leave behind were tortured in a similar way to Paulina. In Chile and later in US exile, he also wrote non-fiction books about popular characters like Donald Duck, which deal with their cultural influence in neocolonial contexts—and thus with their symptomatic dimension (Dorfman 2010).

There are, then, many ways to experience the characters of *Death and the Maiden*. And in the end, the case study illustrates just one of countless ways to analyse and interpret characters in their inexhaustible variety (see Chapter 4 and Chapter 15). However, it supports a central thesis of this book: that the symbolic and symptomatic qualities of characters are often essential to their experience and interpretation. This argues against the limitation of much research to characters' dimensions as represented beings and artefacts. It demonstrates the necessity of considering sociocultural contexts, audience dispositions, and the weight of the world if we are to truly understand characters and the responses to them.

11 More generally, we are dealing with three different possibilities here: (1) The work itself is ethically flawed, e.g., in the portrayal of the characters. (2) The creation of the work is ethically flawed, for example when actors are abused. (3) The creator is ethically flawed and this affects the experience of the work and the characters, as in the present case.

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Filmography

- 14 Tage lebenslänglich (14 Days to Life)*, dir. by Roland Suso Richter, written by Holger Karsten Schmidt (West Germany, 1997)
- 2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle (Two or Three Things I Know about Her)*, written and dir. by Jean-Luc Godard (France, 1967)
- 2001: A Space Odyssey*, dir. by Stanley Kubrick, written by Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick (UK/USA, 1968)
- 21 Grams*, dir. by Alejandro González Iñárritu, written by Guillermo Arriaga (USA, 2003)
- 48 Hrs.*, dir. by Walter Hill, written by Roger Spottiswoode (USA, 1982)
- Adaptation*, dir. by Spike Jonze, written by Charlie Kaufman (USA, 2002)
- Agnes und seine Brüder (Agnes and His Brothers)*, written and dir. by Oskar Roehler (Germany, 2004)
- Ai/Love*, dir. by Takahiko Iimura (Japan/USA, 1962)
- Akira*, dir. by Katsuhiro Ôtomo, written by Izô Hashimoto and Katsuhiro Ôtomo (Japan, 1988)
- Alien*, dir. by Ridley Scott, written by Dan O'Bannon and Ronald Shusett (USA, 1979)
- All Is Lost*, written and dir. by J. C. Chandor (USA, 2013)
- All the President's Men*, dir. by Alan J. Pakula, written by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward (USA, 1976)
- Allein unter Frauen (Alone Among Women)*, dir. by Sönke Wortmann, written by Philipp Weinges (West Germany, 1991)
- Angel Heart*, written and dir. by Alan Parker (USA, 1987)
- Angst essen Seele auf (Ali: Fear Eats the Soul)*, written and dir. by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (West Germany, 1973)
- Annie Hall*, dir. by Woody Allen, written by Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman (USA, 1977)
- Antz*, dir. by Eric Darnell, written by Todd Alcott, Chris Weitz, and Paul Weitz (USA, 1997)
- Apocalypse Now*, dir. by Francis Ford Coppola, written by John Milius and Francis Ford Coppola (USA, 1979)
- As Good as It Gets*, dir. by James L. Brooks, written by Mark Andrus and James L. Brooks (USA, 1997)
- Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen (Even Dwarfs Started Small)*, written and dir. by Werner Herzog (West Germany, 1971)
- Austin Powers—The Spy Who Shagged Me*, dir. by Jay Roach, written by Mike Myers and Michael McCullers (USA, 1999)

- The Baby of Macôn*, written and dir. by Peter Greenaway (Netherlands/France/UK/Germany, 1993)
- Bad Lieutenant*, dir. by Abel Ferrara, written by Zoe Tamerlis and Abel Ferrara (USA, 1992)
- Barry Lyndon*, written and dir. by Stanley Kubrick (UK, 1975)
- Beauty and the Beast*, dir. by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, written by Rogers Allers, Christopher Sanders, and Linda Woolverton (USA, 1991)
- The Big Lebowski*, dir. by Joel Coen, written by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen (USA, 1998)
- Billy Elliot*, dir. by Stephen Daldry, written by Lee Hall (UK/France, 2000)
- Bitter Moon*, dir. by Roman Polanski, written by Roman Polanski and Gérard Brach (France/UK, 1992)
- Black Panther*, dir. by Ryan Coogler, written by Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole (USA, 2018)
- Black Widow*, dir. by Cate Shortland, written by Eric Pearson, Jac Schaeffer, and Ned Benson (USA, 2021)
- Blade Runner*, dir. by Ridley Scott, written by Philip K. Dick and Hampton Fancher (USA, 1982)
- The Blair Witch Project*, written and dir. by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez (USA, 1999)
- The Blob*, dir. by Irvin S. Yeaworth Jr., written by Kay Linaker and Theodore Simonson (USA, 1958)
- Blood Brother*, dir. by John Pogue, written by Michael Finch and Karl Gajdusek (USA, 2018)
- Bonnie and Clyde*, dir. by Arthur Penn, written by David Newman and Robert Benton (USA, 1967)
- Born on the Fourth of July*, dir. by Oliver Stone, written by Ron Kovic and Oliver Stone (USA, 1989)
- Breaking the Waves*, dir. by Lars von Trier, written by Lars von Trier and Peter Asmussen (Denmark, 1996)
- Bringing up Baby*, dir. by Howard Hawks, written by Dudley Nichols and Hagar Wilde (USA, 1938)
- Bronenosce Potjomkin (Battleship Potemkin)*, dir. by Sergej Eisenstein, written by Sergej Eisenstein and Nina Agadshanova-Schutko (Soviet Union, 1925)
- The Bronze Screen: 100 Years of the Latino Image in American Cinema*, dir. by Nancy De Los Santos, Alberto Domínguez, and Susan Racho (USA, 2001)
- Bruce Almighty*, dir. by Tom Shadyac, written by Steve Koren, Mark O'Keefe, and Steve Odekerk (USA, 2003)
- Buffalo 66*, dir. by Vincent Gallo, written by Vincent Gallo and Alison Bagnali (USA, 1996)
- C'era una volta il West (Once Upon a Time in the West)*, dir. by Sergio Leone, written by Sergio Donati and Sergio Leone (Italy/USA, 1969)
- C'est arrivé près de chez vous (Man Bites Dog)*, written and dir. by Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, and Benoît Poelvoorde (Belgium, 1992)
- Cape Fear*, dir. by Martin Scorsese, written by Wesley Strick (USA, 1991)
- Carol*, dir. by Todd Haynes, written by Phyllis Nagy (UK/USA, 2015)
- Casablanca*, dir. by Michael Curtiz, written by Murray Burnett, Joan Allison et al. (USA, 1942)

- The Cell*, dir. by Tarsem Singh, written by Mark Protosevich (USA, 2000)
- Cet obscur objet du désir* (*That Obscure Object of Desire*), dir. by Luis Buñuel, written by Luis Buñuel and Jean-Claude Carrière (France/Spain, 1977)
- Chinatown*, dir. by Roman Polanski, written by Robert Towne (USA, 1974)
- Citizen Kane*, dir. by Orson Welles, written by Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles (USA, 1941)
- Code inconnu* (*Code Unknown*), written and dir. by Michael Haneke (France/Germany/Romania, 2000)
- Colors*, dir. by Dennis Hopper, written by Michael Schiffer (USA, 1988)
- Conan the Barbarian*, dir. by John Milius, written by John Milius and Oliver Stone (USA, 1981)
- Coronation Street*, Granada Television (ITV Independent Television, 1960–)
- Crash*, dir. by Paul Haggis, written by Paul Haggis and Robert Moresco (USA, 1999)
- Cruel Intentions*, written and dir. by Roger Kumble (USA, 1999)
- The Dark Side of Tomorrow/Just the Two of Us*, dir. by Jaque Beerson and Barbara Peters, written by David Novik and Barbara Peters (USA, 1970)
- Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*), dir. by Robert Wiene, written by Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz (Germany, 1920)
- Das Experiment* (*The Experiment*), dir. by Oliver Hirschbiegel, written by Don Bohlinger (West Germany, 2001)
- Das Spinnennetz* (*Spider's Web*), dir. by Bernhard Wicki, written by Wolfgang Kirchner and Bernhard Wicki (West Germany, 1989)
- The Day of the Jackal*, dir. by Fred Zinnemann, written by Frederick Forsyth and Kenneth Ross (France/UK, 1973)
- Dead Ringers*, dir. by David Cronenberg, written by Norman Snider and David Cronenberg (USA/Canada, 1988)
- Death and the Maiden*, dir. by Roman Polanski, written by Rafael Yglesias and Ariel Dorfman (USA/UK/France, 1995)
- Death Wish*, dir. by Michael Winner, written by Wendell Mayes (USA, 1974)
- Deep Blue Sea*, dir. by Renny Harlin, written by Duncan Kennedy, Donna Powers, and Wayne Powers (USA, 1999)
- The Deer Hunter*, dir. by Michael Cimino, written by Deric Washburn (USA, 1978)
- Der Hauptmann von Köpenick* (*The Captain from Köpenick*), written and dir. by Helmut Käutner (West Germany, 1956)
- Der müde Tod* (*Destiny*), dir. by Fritz Lang, written by Thea von Harbou and Fritz Lang (Germany, 1921)
- Der Totmacher* (*The Deathmaker*), dir. by Romuald Karmakar, written by Romuald Karmakar and Michael Farin (Germany, 1995)
- Desperately Seeking Susan*, dir. by Susan Seidelmann, written by Leora Barish (USA, 1985)
- Det Sjunde Inseglet* (*The Seventh Seal*), written and dir. by Ingmar Bergman (Sweden, 1957)

- Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*), dir. by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, written by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Pea Fröhlich and Peter Merthesheimer (West Germany, 1979)
- Die Fälschung* (*Circle of Deceit*), dir. by Volker Schlöndorff, written by Jean-Claude Carrière, Kai Hermann, Volker Schlöndorff, and Margarethe von Trotta (West Germany, 1981)
- Die Hard*, dir. by John Mc Tiernan, written by Jeb Stuart (USA, 1988)
- Die Polizistin*, dir. by Andreas Dresen, written by Leila Stieler (Germany, 2000)
- Die Siebtebauern* (*The Inheritors*), written and dir. by Stefan Ruzowitzki (Germany / Austria, 1998)
- Die Sieger* (*The Invincibles*), dir. by Dominik Graf, written by Dominik Graf and Günter Schütter (Germany, 1994)
- Dirty Harry*, dir. by Don Siegel, written by Harry Julian Fink, Rita M. Fink, and Dean Riesner (USA, 1971)
- Disclosure*, dir. by Barry Levinson, written by Michael Crichton and Paul Attanasio (USA, 1994)
- Do the Right Thing*, written and dir. by Spike Lee (USA, 1989)
- Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, dir. by Rouben Mamoulian, written by Samuel Hoffenstein and Percy Heath (USA, 1931)
- Duck Amuck*, dir. by Chuck Jones, written by Michael Maltese (USA, 1953)
- Duel*, dir. by Steven Spielberg, written by Richard Matheson (USA, 1971)
- E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, dir. by Steven Spielberg, written by Melissa Mathison (USA, 1982)
- En avoir (ou pas)* (*To Have (or Not)*), written and dir. by Laetitia Masson (France, 1995)
- Everything Everywhere All at Once*, written and dir. by Daniel Kwan und Daniel Scheinert (USA 2022)
- Evita*, dir. by Alan Parker, written by Tim Rice and Alan Parker (USA/Argentina, 1996)
- Ex Machina*, dir. and written by Alex Garland (UK/USA 2014)
- The Exorcist*, dir. by William Friedkin, written by William Peter Blatty (USA, 1973)
- Face/Off*, dir. by John Woo, written by Mike Werb and Michael Colleary (USA, 1997)
- Faces*, written and dir. by John Cassavetes (USA, 1968)
- Fargo*, dir. by Joel Coen, written by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen (USA, 1996)
- Farligt venskab* (*Body Switch*), dir. by Jørn Faurschou, written by Jørn Faurschou and Thorstein Thomson (Denmark, 1995)
- Fatal Attraction*, dir. by Adrian Lyne, written by James Dearden and Nicholas Meyer (USA, 1987)
- Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, dir. by Terry Gilliam, written by Terry Gilliam, Tony Grisoni, Tod Davies, and Alex Cox (USA, 1998)
- Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, dir. by Hironobu Sakaguchi and Motonori Sakakibara, written by Al Reinert (Japan/USA, 2001)
- A Fish Called Wanda*, dir. by Charles Crichton, written by John Cleese and Charles Crichton (USA, 1988)
- Fish Tank*, written and dir. by Andrea Arnold (UK/Netherlands, 2009)
- The Fly*, dir. by David Cronenberg, written and dir. by Charles Edward Pogue and David Cronenberg (USA, 1986)

- Force Majeure*, written and dir. by Ruben Östlund (Sweden/France/Norway/Denmark/Italy, 2014)
- Forrest Gump*, dir. by Robert Zemeckis, written by Eric Roth (USA, 1994)
- Freaks*, dir. by Tod Browning, written by Willis Goldbeck, Leon Gordon and Al Boasberg (USA, 1932)
- The Fugitive Kind*, dir. by Sidney Lumet, written by Meade Roberts (USA, 1959)
- Gandhi*, dir. by Richard Attenborough, written by John Briley (UK/USA/India, 1982)
- Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, dir. by Howard Hawks, written by Anita Loos and Joseph Fields (USA, 1953)
- Get Out*, written and dir. by Jordan Peele (USA/Japan, 2017)
- Gilda*, dir. by Charles Vidor, written by Jo Eisinger and Marion Parsonnet (USA, 1946)
- Gone with the Wind*, dir. by Victor Fleming, written by Sidney Howard (USA, 1939)
- Good Will Hunting*, dir. by Gus Van Sant, written by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck (USA, 1997)
- The Great Dictator*, written and dir. by Charles Chaplin (USA, 1940)
- The Great Gatsby*, dir. by Jack Clayton, written by Francis Ford Coppola (USA, 1974)
- Greed*, written and dir. by Erich von Stroheim (USA, 1924)
- Groundhog Day*, dir. by Harold Ramis, written by Danny Rubin (USA, 1993)
- Guide*, written and dir. by Vijay Anand (India, 1965)
- The Gunfighter*, dir. by William S. Hart, written by Monte M. Katterjohn (USA, 1917)
- Hair*, dir. by Milos Forman, written by Gerome Ragni and James Rado (USA, 1979)
- Halloween*, dir. by John Carpenter, written by John Carpenter and Debra Hill (USA, 1978)
- Hamlet*, written and dir. by Michael Almereyda (USA, 2000)
- Hana-bi (Fireworks)*, written and dir. by Takeshi Kitano (Japan, 1997)
- Harold and Maude*, dir. by Hal Ashby, written by Colin Higgins (USA, 1971)
- Heat*, written and dir. by Michael Mann (USA, 1995)
- Hellzapoppin'*, dir. by H. C. Potter, written by Net Perrin and Warren Wilson (USA, 1941)
- Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, dir. by John McNaughton, written by Richard Fire and John McNaughton (USA, 1986)
- High Fidelity*, dir. by Stephen Frears, written by D. V. DeVincentis (UK/USA, 2000)
- Himitsu no hanazono (The Secret Garden)*, dir. by Shinobu Yaguchi, written by Takuiji Suzuki and Shinobu Yaguchi (Japan, 1996)
- His Girl Friday*, dir. by Howard Hawks, written by Ben Hecht and Charles McArthur (USA, 1940)
- Hollow Man*, dir. by Paul Verhoeven, written by Gary Scott Thompson and Andrew W. Marlowe (USA, 2000)
- Homestories*, dir. by Matthias Müller and Dirk Schäfer (West Germany, 1990)
- The House of the Spirits (Das Geisterhaus)*, dir. by Bille August, written by Isabel Allende and Bille August (Denmark/West Germany/Portugal/USA, 1993)

- The Hucksters*, dir. by Jack Conway, written by Edward Chodorov and George Wells (USA, 1947)
- The Hudsucker Proxy*, dir. by Joel Coen, written by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen (USA, 1994)
- The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, dir. by William Dieterle, written by Sonya Levien (USA, 1939)
- The Hunger*, dir. by Tony Scott, written by James Costigan and Ivan Davis (UK, 1983)
- The Hunt for Red October*, dir. by John McTiernan, written by Tom Clancy and Larry Ferguson (USA, 1990)
- I, Robot*, dir. by Alex Proyas, written by Jeff Vintar and Akiva Goldsman (USA, 2004)
- Il cavaliere inesistente (The Nonexistent Knight)*, dir. by Pino Zac, written by Italo Calvino, Tommaso Chiaretti, and David Lachterman (Italy, 1969)
- Il deserto rosso (Red Desert)*, dir. by Michelangelo Antonioni, written by Michelangelo Antonioni and Tonino Guerra (Italy/France, 1965)
- Il nome della rosa (The Name of the Rose)*, dir. by Jean-Jaques Annaud, written by Andrew Birkin and Gérard Brach (Italy/France/West Germany, 1986)
- Imitation of Life*, dir. by Douglas Sirk, written by Eleanore Griffin and Allan Scott (USA, 1959)
- In Gefahr und größter Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod*, written and dir. by Alexander Kluge and Edgar Reitz (West Germany, 1974)
- The Incredible Shrinking Man*, dir. by Jack Arnold, written by Richard Matheson and Richard Alan Simmons (USA, 1957)
- Independence Day*, dir. by Roland Emmerich, written by Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich (USA, 1996)
- Inside Out*, dir. by Pete Docter and Ronnie Del Carmen, written by Pete Docter, Meg LeFauve, and Josh Cooley (USA, 2015)
- Intolerance*, written and dir. by D. W. Griffith (USA, 1916)
- Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, dir. by Phil Kaufman, written by W. D. Richter (USA, 1978)
- Jacob's Ladder*, dir. by Adrian Lyne, written by Bruce Joel Rubin (USA, 1990)
- Jagte Raho (Stay Alert)*, dir. by Amit Mitra and Sombhu Mitra, written by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Amit Mitra, and Sombhu Mitra (India, 1956)
- Jaws*, dir. by Steven Spielberg, written by Peter Benchley and Carl Gottlieb (USA, 1975)
- Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, written and dir. by Chantal Akerman (Belgium/France, 1975)
- JFK*, dir. by Oliver Stone, written by Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar (USA/France, 1991)
- Johnny Got His Gun*, written and dir. by Dalton Trumbo (USA, 1971)
- Jonas*, written and dir. by Ottomar Domnick (West Germany, 1957)
- Jud Süß—Ein Film als Verbrechen?*, dir. by Horst Königstein, written by Horst Königstein and Joachim Lang (Germany, 2001)
- Jud Süß*, dir. by Veit Harlan, written by Veit Harlan and Ludwig Metzger (Germany, 1940)
- Judge Dredd*, dir. by Danny Cannon, written by John Wagner and Carlos Ezquerro (USA, 1995)
- Jurassic Park*, dir. by Steven Spielberg, written by Steven Spielberg, David Koepp and Michael Crichton (USA, 1993)

- Katzelmacher*, written and dir. by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (West Germany, 1969)
- Kids*, dir. by Larry Clark, written by Larry Clark and Harmony Korine (USA, 1995)
- The Killers*, dir. by Robert Siodmak, written by John Huston and Anthony Veiller (USA, 1946)
- Kind Hearts and Coronets*, dir. by Robert Hamer, written by Robert Hamer and John Dighton (UK, 1949)
- L'âge d'or*, dir. by Luis Buñuel, written by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí (France, 1930)
- L'amour en fuite* (*Love on the Run*), dir. by François Truffaut, written by Jean Aurel, Marie-France Pisier, François Truffaut, and Suzanne Schiffmann (France, 1979)
- L'année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year at Marienbad*), dir. by Alain Resnais, written by Alain Robbe-Grillet (France, 1961)
- L'avventura*, dir. by Michelangelo Antonioni, written by Michelangelo Antonioni, Elio Bartolini, and Tonino Guerra (Italy, 1960)
- L'eclisse*, dir. by Michelangelo Antonioni, written by Michelangelo Antonioni and Elio Bartolini (Italy/France, 1962)
- La double vie de Véronique* (*The Double Life of Véronique*), dir. by Krzysztof Kieslowski, written by Krzysztof Kieslowski and Krzysztof Piesiewicz (France/Poland/Norway, 1991)
- La notte*, dir. by Michelangelo Antonioni, written by Michelangelo Antonioni and Ennio Flaiano (Italy/France, 1960)
- La Pianiste* (*The Piano Teacher*), written and dir. by Michael Haneke (France/Austria, 2001)
- La stanza del figlio* (*The Son's Room*), dir. by Nanni Moretti, written by Linda Ferri and Nanni Moretti (Italy/France, 2001)
- Ladri di Biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*), dir. by Vittorio De Sica, written by Cesare Zavattini, Oreste Biancoli, and Suso Cecchi D'Amico (Italy, 1948)
- The Lady in Red*, dir. by Lewis Teague, written by John Sayles (USA, 1979)
- Lady in the Lake*, dir. by Robert Montgomery, written by Steve Fisher (USA, 1947)
- The Last King of Scotland*, dir. by Kevin MacDonald, written by Peter Morgan and Jeremy Brock (UK, 2006)
- Le cinquième élément* (*The Fifth Element*), dir. by Luc Besson, written by Robert Mark Kamen and Luc Besson (France/UK/USA, 1997)
- Le doulos*, dir. by Jean-Pierre Melville, written by Pierre Lesou and Jean-Pierre Melville (France/Italy, 1961)
- Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (*Amélie*), dir. by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, written by Guillaume Laurant and Jean-Pierre Jeunet (France, 2001)
- Le feu follet* (*The Fire Within*), dir. by Louis Malle, written by Pierre Drieu La Rochelle (France, 1963)
- Le mépris* (*Contempt*), written and dir. by Jean-Luc Godard (France/Italy, 1963)
- Leaving Las Vegas*, written and dir. by Mike Figgis (USA, 1995)
- Léolo* (*Leolo*), written and dir. by Jean-Claude Lauzon (France/Canada, 1992)
- Les quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*), dir. by François Truffaut, written by François Truffaut and Marcel Moussy (France, 1959)

- A Letter to Three Wives*, dir. by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, written by John Klemptner and Vera Caspary (USA, 1994)
- The Little Shop of Horrors*, dir. by Roger Corman, written by Charles B. Griffith (USA, 1960)
- Little Voice*, dir. by Mark Herman, written by Jim Cartwright and Mark Herman (UK, 1998)
- Lola rennt (Run Lola Run)*, written and dir. by Tom Tykwer (Germany, 1998)
- Lolita*, dir. by Stanley Kubrick, written by Vladimir Nabokov (USA/UK, 1962)
- The Look of Silence*, dir. by Joshua Oppenheimer (Denmark, 2014)
- Loong Boonmee raleuk chat (Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives)*, dir. by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, written by Phra Sripariyattiweti and Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Thailand/UK/France/Germany/Spain/Netherlands, 2010)
- The Lost Daughter*, dir. by Maggie Gyllenhaal, written by Maggie Gyllenhaal and Elena Ferrante (USA/UK/Israel/Greece, 2021)
- Love and Death*, written and dir. by Woody Allen (USA, 1975)
- Love etc.*, dir. by Marion Vernoux, written by Julian Barnes and Dodine Herry (France, 1996)
- M - eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder (M)*, dir. by Fritz Lang, written by Thea von Harbou and Fritz Lang (Germany, 1931)
- Mad Max*, dir. by George Miller, written by James McCausland and George Miller (Australia, 1979)
- The Magnificent Seven*, dir. by John Sturges, written by William Roberts (USA, 1960)
- Magnolia*, written and dir. by Paul Thomas Anderson (USA, 1999)
- Main Hoon Na*, dir. by Farah Khan, written by Farah Khan, Rajesh Sathi, and Abbas Tyrewala (India, 2004)
- The Man Who Wasn't There*, dir. by Joel Coen, written by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen (USA, 2001)
- Mars Attacks!*, dir. by Tim Burton, written by Len Brown and Woody Gelman (USA, 1996)
- Marseille*, written and dir. by Angela Schanelec (Germany/France, 2004)
- The Meaning of Life*, dir. by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones, written by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin (UK, 1983)
- Meet Joe Black*, dir. by Martin Brest, written by Ron Osborn and Jeff Reno (USA, 1998)
- Mein langsames Leben (Passing Summer)*, written and dir. by Angela Schanelec (Germany, 2001)
- Mélo*, dir. by Alain Resnais, written by Henri Bernstein and Alain Resnais (France, 1986)
- Men in Black*, dir. by Barry Sonnenfeld, written by Ed Solomon (USA, 1997)
- Menschen am Sonntag (People on Sunday)*, dir. by Robert Siodmak and Edgar G. Ulmer, written by Billy Wilder (Germany, 1930)
- Metropolis*, dir. by Fritz Lang, written by Thea von Harbou and Fritz Lang (Germany, 1927)
- Mighty Aphrodite*, written and dir. by Woody Allen (USA, 1995)
- Monster*, written and dir. by Patty Jenkins (Germany/USA, 2003)
- Moonlight*, dir. by Barry Jenkins, written by Barry Jenkins and Tarell Alvin McCraney (USA, 2016)

- Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock, written by Norman Krasna (USA, 1941)
- Mulholland Drive*, written and dir. by David Lynch (USA, 2001)
- Murder, My Sweet*, dir. by Edward Dmytryk, written by John Paxton (USA, 1944)
- The Naked Gun*, dir. by David Zucker, written by Jerry Zucker, David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, and Pat Proft (USA, 1988)
- Naked*, written and dir. by Mike Leigh (UK, 1993)
- Nashville*, dir. by Robert Altman, written by Joan Tewkesbury (USA, 1975)
- Natural Born Killers*, dir. by Oliver Stone, written by Quentin Tarantino and David Veloz (USA, 1994)
- North by Northwest*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock, written by Ernest Lehman (USA, 1959)
- Novecento* (1900), dir. by Bernardo Bertolucci, written by Bernardo Bertolucci, Franco Arcalli, and Giuseppe Bertolucci (Italy, 1976)
- Nur über meine Leiche* (*Over My Dead Body*), dir. by Rainer Matsutani, written by Rainer Matsutani and Sebastian Niemann (Germany, 1995)
- Oktjabr* (*October/Ten Days that Shook the World*), written and dir. by Sergej M. Eisenstein (Soviet Union, 1927)
- Orfeu Negro* (*Black Orpheus*), dir. by Marcel Camus, written by Jaques Viot and Marcel Camus (France/Italy/Brazil, 1959)
- Orphée* (*Orpheus*), written and dir. by Jean Cocteau (France, 1950)
- Otto e mezzo* (8½), dir. by Federico Fellini, written by Federico Fellini, Tullio Pinelli, Ennio Flaiano, and Brunello Rondi (Italy, 1963)
- Palindromes*, written and dir. by Todd Solondz (USA, 2004)
- The Passion of the Christ*, dir. by Mel Gibson, written by Benedict Fitzgerald and Mel Gibson (USA, 2004)
- Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, dir. by Tom Tykwer, written by Tom Tykwer, Andrew Birkin, and Bernd Eichinger (Germany/France/Spain/UK/Belgium, 2006)
- Persona*, written and dir. by Ingmar Bergman (Sweden, 1966)
- The Piano*, written and dir. by Jane Campion (Australia, 1993)
- Pierrot le fou* (*Pierrot the Fool*), written and dir. by Jean-Luc Godard (France/Italy, 1965)
- Planet of the Apes*, dir. by Franklin J. Schaffner, written by Michael Wlison and Rod Serling (USA, 1968)
- Play It Again, Sam*, dir. by Herbert Ross, written by Woody Allen (USA, 1972)
- The Player*, dir. by Robert Altman, written by Michael Tolkin (USA, 1992)
- Pleasantville*, written and dir. by Gary Ross (USA, 1998)
- Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*), written and dir. by Céline Sciamma (France, 2020)
- The Poseidon Adventure*, dir. by Ronald Neame, written by Paul Gallico and Wendell Mayes (USA, 1972)

- The Postman Always Rings Twice*, dir. by Bob Rafelson, written by James M. Cain and David Mamet (USA, 1981)
- Pretty Woman*, dir. by Garry Marshall, written by J. F. Lawton (USA, 1990)
- Primary Colors*, dir. by Mike Nichols, written by Elaine May (USA/UK/Germany/Japan/France, 1998)
- The Prince and the Pauper*, dir. by Don Chaffey, written by Jack Whittingham (USA, 1962)
- Prospero's Books*, written and dir. by Peter Greenaway (UK/France/Netherlands/Italy, 1991)
- Psycho*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock, written by Joseph Stefano (USA, 1960)
- Pulp Fiction*, dir. by Quentin Tarantino, written by Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avary (USA, 1994)
- Pyasa (Thirst)*, dir. by Guru Dutt, written by Abrar Alvi (India, 1957)
- Quadrophenia*, dir. by Franc Roddam, written by Dave Humphries and Franc Roddam (UK, 1979)
- Raging Bull*, dir. by Martin Scorsese, written by Paul Scrader and Mardik Martin (USA, 1980)
- Raiders of the Lost Ark*, dir. by Steven Spielberg, written by Lawrence Kasdan, George Lucas, and Philip Kaufman (USA, 1981)
- Rain Man*, dir. by Barry Levinson, written by Barry Morrow and Ronald Bass (USA, 1988)
- Rebel Without a Cause*, dir. by Nicholas Ray, written by Stewart Stern and Irving Shulman (USA, 1955)
- Red Hot Riding Hood*, dir. by Text Avery, written by Rich Hogan (USA, 1943)
- The Relic*, dir. by Peter Hyams, written by Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child (UK/USA/Germany/Japan, 1997)
- Repulsion*, dir. by Roman Polanski, written by Roman Polanski and Gérard Brach (UK, 1965)
- The Road to Wellville*, written and dir. by Alan Parker (USA, 1994)
- The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, dir. by Jim Sharman, written by Richard O' Brien and Jim Sharman (UK/USA, 1975)
- Rocky IV*, written and dir. by Sylvester Stallone (USA, 1985)
- Romeo + Juliet*, dir. by Baz Luhrmann, written by Craig Pearce and Buz Luhrmann (USA, 1996)
- Rosemary's Baby*, written and dir. by Roman Polanski (USA, 1968)
- Rossini*, dir. by Helmut Dietl, written by Helmut Dietl and Patrick Süskind (Germany, 1997)
- Sans toit ni loi (Vagabond)*, written and dir. by Agnès Varda (France, 1985)
- Schindler's List*, dir. by Steven Spielberg, written by Steven Zaillian (USA, 1993)
- Scream*, dir. by Wes Craven, written by Kevin Williamson (USA, 1996)
- Seven*, dir. by David Fincher, written by Andrew Kevin Walker (USA, 1995)
- Serial Mom*, written and dir. by John Waters (USA, 1994)
- Sex and the City*, Darren Star Productions (Home Box Office, 1998–2004)
- Sex and the City*, dir. by Michael Patrick King, written by Michael Patrick King, Candace Bushnell, and Darren Star (USA, 2008)
- The Shawshank Redemption*, written and dir. by Frank Darabont (USA, 1994)

- The Shining*, dir. by Stanley Kubrick, written by Stanley Kubrick and Diane Johnson (UK/USA, 1980)
- Shivers (It Came from Within)*, written and dir. by David Cronenberg (Canada, 1974)
- Short Cuts*, dir. by Robert Altman, written by Robert Altman and Raymond Carver (USA, 1993)
- Shrek*, dir. by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, written by Ted Elliott, Terry Rossio, Joe Stillman, and Roger S.H. Schulman (USA, 2001)
- Sicilia! (Sicily!)*, written and dir. by Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub (France/Italy/Switzerland, 1999)
- The Silence of the Lambs*, dir. by Jonathan Demme, written by Ted Tally (USA, 1991)
- The Sixth Sense*, written and dir. by M. Night Shyamalan (USA, 1999)
- Sixty Years a Queen*, dir. by William G. B. Barker, written by Harry Engholm, G. B. Samuelson, and Arthur Shirley (UK, 1913)
- Sleepless in Seattle*, dir. by Nora Ephron, written by Jeff Arch and Nora Ephron (USA, 1993)
- Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, dir. by David Hand, written by Dorothy Ann Blank and Richard Creedon (USA, 1937)
- Some Like It Hot*, dir. by Billy Wilder, written by Billy Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond (USA, 1959)
- Speed*, dir. by Jan de Bont, written by Graham Yost (USA, 1994)
- Stachka (Strike)*, dir. by Sergei M. Eisenstein, written by Grigori Aleksandrov and Sergei M. Eisenstein (Soviet Union, 1925)
- Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, dir. by Robert Wise, written by Harold Livingstone (USA, 1979)
- Star Wars*, written and dir. by George Lucas (USA/UK, 1977)
- Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace*, written and dir. by George Lucas (USA, 1999)
- The Stepford Wives*, dir. by Bryan Forbes, written by Ira Levin and William Goldman (USA, 1975)
- Strange Days*, dir. by Kathryn Bigelow, written by James Cameron and Jay Cocks (USA, 1995)
- A Streetcar Named Desire*, dir. by Elia Kazan, written by Oscar Saul (USA, 1951)
- Sunset Boulevard*, dir. by Billy Wilder, written by Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder, and D. M. Marshman jr. (USA, 1950)
- Superman*, dir. by Richard Donner, written by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster (USA, 1975)
- Suzhou he (Suzhou River)*, written and dir. by Ye Lou (China/Germany, 2000)
- Sweetie*, written and dir. by Jane Campion (Australia, 1989)
- Swimming with Sharks*, written and dir. by George Huang (USA, 1994)
- Switch*, written and dir. by Blake Edwards (USA, 1991)
- Systemsprengrer (System Crasher)*, written and dir. by Nora Fingscheidt (Germany, 2019)
- Taxi Driver*, dir. by Martin Scorsese, written by Paul Schrader (USA, 1976)
- The Terminator*, dir. by James Cameron, written and dir. by James Cameron and Gale Ann Hurd (USA, 1984)
- Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, dir. by James Cameron, written by James Cameron and William Wisher Jr. (USA, 1991)

- Thelma & Louise*, dir. by Ridley Scott, written by Callie Khouri (USA, 1991)
- The Thing*, dir. by John Carpenter, written by John W. Campbell Jr. and Bill Lancaster (USA, 1982)
- Three Men and a Baby*, dir. by Leonard Nimoy, written by Jim Cruickshank and James Orr (USA, 1987)
- The Three Musketeers*, dir. by Stephen Herek, written by David Loughery (USA, 1993)
- Titanic*, written and dir. by James Cameron (USA, 1997)
- To Have and Have Not*, dir. by Howard Hawks, written by Jules Furthman and William Faulkner (USA, 1944)
- Todesboten* [short film], written and dir. by Stefan Eckel and Stefan Prehn (Germany, 1994)
- Tomorrow Never Dies*, dir. by Roger Spottiswoode, written by Bruce Feirstein (USA/UK, 1997)
- Total Recall*, dir. by Paul Verhoeven, written by Ronald Shusett, Dan O'Bannon, and Gary Goldman (USA, 1990)
- Touchez pas au Grisbi (Grisbi)*, dir. by Jacques Becker, written by Jacques Becker and Maurice Griffe (France/Italy, 1953)
- Twins*, dir. by Ivan Reitman, written by William Davis and William Osborne (USA, 1988)
- Twister*, dir. by Jan de Bont, written by Michael Crichton and Anne Marie Martin (USA, 1996)
- Un chien andalou*, dir. by Luis Buñuel, written by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí (France, 1929)
- Up*, written and dir. by Pete Docter and Bob Peterson (USA, 2009)
- The Usual Suspects*, dir. by Bryan Singer, written by Christopher McQuarrie (UK/Germany/USA, 1995)
- Vanilla Sky*, written and dir. by Cameron Crowe (USA, 2001)
- Vertigo*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock, written by Alec Coppel and Samuel Taylor (USA, 1958)
- Very Bad Things*, written and dir. by Peter Berg (USA, 1998)
- Vincent & Theo*, dir. by Robert Altman, written by Julian Mitchell (Netherlands/UK/France, 1990)
- Wall Street*, dir. by Oliver Stone, written by Stanley Weiser and Oliver Stone (USA, 1987)
- Welcome to the Dollhouse*, written and dir. by Todd Solondz (USA, 1995)
- West Side Story*, dir. by Jerome Robbins, written by Jerome Robbins and Arthur Laurents (UK/USA, 1961)
- When Harry Met Sally*, dir. by Rob Reiner, written by Nora Ephron (USA, 1989)
- Wild at Heart*, written and dir. by David Lynch (USA, 1990)
- The Wild One*, dir. by László Benedek, written by John Paxton (USA, 1954)
- Wilhelmsburger Freitag*, dir. by Egon Monk, written by Christian Geissler (West Germany, 1964)
- Winnetou—1. Teil (Winnetou)*, dir. by Harald Reinl, written by Harld G. Petersson (West Germany/Italy/Yugoslavia, 1963)
- Winter's Bone*, dir. by Debra Granik, written by Debra Granik, Anne Rosellini and Daniel Woodrell (USA, 2010)

Witness, dir. by Peter Weir, written by Earl W. Wallace and William Kelley (USA, 1985)

The Wizard of Oz, dir. by Victor Fleming, King Vidor, Richard Thorpe, George Cukor, and Lewis Milestone, written by Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson, and Edgar Allan Woolf (USA, 1939)

Wolf, dir. by Mike Nichols, written by Jim Harrison and Wesley Strick (USA, 1994)

Yellow Fever, written and dir. by Ng'endo Mukii (UK/Kenya, 2012)

Yin shi nan nu (Eat Drink Man Woman), dir. by Ang Lee, written by Ang Lee, James Schamus, and Hui-Ling Wang (Taiwan, 1994)

Zelig, written and dir. by Woody Allen (USA, 1983)

Index

Index of Films

- 8½ 193
21 Grams 76
48 Hrs. 404, 442, 452
400 Blows, *The* 333, 419
2001: *A Space Odyssey* 220

Adaptation 129, 415, 495, 509, 657
Agnes and His Brothers 578
Agnes und seine Brüder. See *Agnes and His Brothers*
Alien 2, 152, 218, 283, 433, 454, 495–497, 609, 636–637, 641, 709
Ali: Fear Eats the Soul 193
Allein unter Frauen. See *Alone Among Women*
All Is Lost 427
All the President's Men 305
Alone Among Women 441
Amélie 331
Angel Heart 303, 332
Angst essen Seele auf. See *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*
Annie Hall 237
Antz 238
Apocalypse Now 226, 402, 407–408, 430, 433
Artists Under the Big Top: Perplexed 588
As Good as It Gets 243, 332, 634
Austin Powers 342

Bad Lieutenant 409, 432, 634
Barry Lyndon 326, 429, 580
Battleship Potemkin 453
Beauty and the Beast 239, 435–436
Bicycle Thieves 402, 405
Big Lebowski, The 372
Billy Elliot 2
Black Panther 2, 457
Black Widow 2, 239
Blade Runner 231
Blair Witch Project, The 316, 597, 612
Blood Brother 337
Body Switch 284
Bonnie and Clyde 633

Born on the Fourth of July 282
Breaking the Waves 403
Bronenosec Potjomkin. See *Battleship Potemkin*
Bruce Almighty 457
Buffalo 66 402
Buffy the Vampire Slayer 454

Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, The 310, 317
Cagney & Lacey 453, 460
Cape Fear 402
Captain from Köpenick, The 432
Carol 247, 409, 412
Casablanca 10, 21, 51–52, 54, 56–57, 62, 68, 76, 84, 89–91, 95, 126, 149–150, 165–166, 171, 173, 190, 194, 197, 205, 211, 213, 240, 245–247, 249–252, 267, 270, 272–273, 296, 303, 306, 311, 328, 331–333, 359, 377, 379–385, 388, 405–406, 416–417, 423, 429, 433, 458, 466–467, 470–471, 478, 487, 521–525, 527–528, 531, 533, 536, 542–543, 552, 554, 557, 563–564, 572, 575, 578, 580, 582, 590, 598–599, 605, 609–610, 629–630, 633, 657–659, 661–662, 665, 673–675, 677, 680, 682, 684, 686–689, 691–692, 695, 699, 708
Cell, The 240, 253
C'era una volta il West. See *Once Upon a Time in the West*
C'est arrivé près de chez vous. See *Man Bites Dog*
Cet obscur objet du désir. See *That Obscure Object of Desire*
Chinatown 705, 751
Citizen Kane 4–5, 193, 294, 326, 416, 432, 454, 490–495, 580
Cliffhanger 640
Clockwork Orange, A 81, 515, 602, 611, 624, 633, 657, 689
Code inconnu. See *Code Unknown*
Code Unknown 392, 433
Colors 239
Conan the Barbarian 342
Coronation Street 17
Crash 460

- Cruel Intentions* 315
Dark Side of Tomorrow, The 284
Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari. See *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, The*
Das Experiment. See *Experiment, The*
Das Spinnennetz. See *Spider's Web*
David and Goliath 435
Day of the Jackal, The 352
Dead Ringers 227, 435
Death and the Maiden 21, 331, 669, 677, 701–706, 708, 711, 713, 715–716, 719, 725–727, 730–732, 736–738, 741–743, 745–753
Deathmaker, The 331, 454, 634
Death Wish 726
Deep Blue Sea 433
Deer Hunter, The 306
Der Hauptmann von Köpenick. See *Captain from Köpenick, The*
Der müde Tod. See *Destiny*
Der Totmacher. See *Deathmaker, The*
Desperately Seeking Susan 453
Destiny 84, 106, 128, 484, 495–496, 594, 657, 695
Det Sjunde Inseget. See *Seventh Seal, The*
Die Ehe der Maria Braun. See *Marriage of Maria Braun, The*
Die Fälschung. See *Circle of Deceit*
Die Hard 358
Die Siebtelbauern. See *Inheritors, The*
Dirty Harry 193, 239, 403
Disclosure 452
Do the Right Thing 435
Double Life of Véronique, The 435
Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde 358, 435
Duck Amuck 289, 376, 674
Duel 243, 332, 454

Eat Drink Man Woman 612
Ein Yeti zum Verlieben 356
E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial 409
Everything Everywhere All at Once 221
Evita 303
Ex Machina 23, 152, 220
Exorcist, The 283, 315
Expanse, The 342
Experiment, The 231

Face/Off 226, 283
Faces 349
Fargo 360, 372, 757

Farligt venskab. See *Body Switch*
Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas 452, 578
Fight Club 86, 202, 218, 225, 283, 326, 429, 579–580, 589, 594, 674
Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within 226
Finding Nemo 414
Fire Within, The 193, 402, 405, 493–494
Fireworks 243, 332
Fish Called Wanda, A 354
Fish Tank 409
Fly, The 161, 180, 282, 329, 358
Force Majeure 243
Forrest Gump 498
Freaks 226, 282
Fugitive Kind, The 231, 371

Gandhi 247, 427, 636, 705, 710
Gentlemen Prefer Blondes 305
Ghost in the Shell 642
Gilda 231, 454
Godfather, The 416, 633
Gone with the Wind 409
Good Will Hunting 402, 441
Great Dictator, The 193
Great Gatsby, The 305, 452
Greed 328, 331
Groundhog Day 328
Guide 258
Gunfighter, The 345

Hair 453, 657
Halloween 331, 549
Hana-bi. See *Fireworks*
Harold and Maude 435
Heat 330, 333, 436, 453
Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer 432
High Fidelity 361
Hollow Man 428
Hucksters, The 10
Hudsucker Proxy, The 371
Hunger, The 315

I, Daniel Blake 396
I Heart Huckabees 259, 430
Il cavaliere inesistente. See *Nonexistent Knight, The*
Il deserto rosso. See *Red Desert*
Il nome della rosa. See *Name of the Rose, The*
Imitation of Life 193, 317, 341, 387, 438–441, 443, 677

- Incredible Shrinking Man, The* 281
Independence Day 405
In Gefahr und größter Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod 318
Inheritors, The 435
Inside Out 240
Intolerance 359
Invasion of the Body Snatchers 283
I, Robot 220

Jacob's Ladder 543, 579
Jagte Raho 258
Jaws 170, 243, 253, 303, 558, 560, 564, 568, 578, 629
Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles 358, 392, 400, 404
Johnny Got His Gun 226, 282, 402, 405
Jonas 283
Judge Dredd 193, 360
Jud Süß 8, 128, 215, 310, 458, 502–503, 546, 602, 695
Jurassic Park 239, 303, 350, 431, 445, 656
Just the Two of Us. See *Dark Side of Tomorrow, The*

Katzelmacher 374
Killers, The 454
Kind Hearts and Coronets 303

L'âge d'or 7, 244
L'avventura 368, 370
L'eclisse 368
La grande bouffe 253
La Linea 375
La notte 368
Ladri di Bicicletta. See *Bicycle Thieves*
Lady in Red, The 315
Lady in the Lake 549, 589
La grande abbuffata. See *La grande bouffe*
L'amour en fuite. See *Love on the Run*
L'année dernière à Marienbad. See *Last Year at Marienbad*
La Pianiste. See *Piano Teacher, The*
Lassie Come Home 221
Last King of Scotland, The 656
Last Year at Marienbad 5, 7, 171, 283, 376, 454, 656, 674
Le cinquième élément. See *Fifth Element, The*
Le doulos 358, 633
Leaving Las Vegas 7, 411

Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain. See *Amélie*
Le feu follet. See *Fire Within, The*
Léolo 227, 420
Les quatre cents coups. See *400 Blows, The*
Little Shop of Horrors, The 220, 222
Little Voice 238
Look of Silence, The 743
Loong Boonmee raleuk chat. See *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*
Lord of the Rings, The 651
Lost Daughter, The 243
Love and Death 359
Love on the Run 418

Mad Max 198
Magnificent Seven, The 453
Magnolia 453
Main Hoon Na 395
Man Bites Dog 549
Marriage of Maria Braun, The 113, 136, 138, 140–141, 143, 145, 150, 322–323, 374, 391, 414, 416, 495, 609, 677
Marseille 462–463
Matrix, The 495
Meaning of Life, The 223
Meet Joe Black 360
Mélo 354
Men in Black 315
Menschen am Sonntag. See *People on Sunday*
Metropolis 240
Mighty Aphrodite 361
Modern Times 399
Monster 432
Moonlight 209, 292, 337, 409, 442–443
Mulholland Drive 327
Murder, My Sweet 578

Naked 8, 198, 432, 634
Nashville 453
Natural Born Killers 515, 633
Nonexistent Knight, The 376, 497
North by Northwest 409
Novecento 404
Nur über meine Leiche. See *Over My Dead Body*

October: Ten Days that Shook the World 240, 496
Oktjabr. See *October: Ten Days that Shook the World*
Once Upon a Time in the West 303, 306
Orfeu Negro 360, 495

- Orphée* 360
Otto e mezzo. See *8½*
Over My Dead Body 359

Palindromes 304
Passion of the Christ, The 402
People on Sunday 310
Perfume: The Story of a Murderer 88, 253
Persona 7, 283, 315
Piano Teacher, The 238
Piano, The 239, 407–409, 452
Pierrot le fou. See *Pierrot the Fool*
Pierrot the Fool 358, 402
Player, The 305
Play It Again, Sam 528
Pleasantville 315, 435
Portrait de la jeune fille en feu. See *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*
Portrait of a Lady on Fire 247
Poseidon Adventure, The 453
Postman Always Rings Twice, The 331
Pretty Woman 225, 231, 404, 710
Primary Colors 509
Prince and the Pauper, The 435
Prospero's Books 361
Psycho 240, 303, 481
Pulp Fiction 203, 306, 330, 370–372, 509, 625
Pyraasa 258

Quadrophenia 435

Raging Bull 409, 571, 634, 641
Raiders of the Lost Ark 436
Rain Man 410
Rashomon 589
Rebel Without a Cause 346
Red Hot Riding Hood 234, 509
Relic, The 226, 331
Repulsion 236, 404
Road to Wellville, The 238, 402
Rocky Horror Picture Show, The 657
Rocky IV 437
Roseanne 438
Rosemary's Baby 543, 589, 705
Run Lola Run 317, 332, 353, 434

Sans toit ni loi. See *Vagabond*
Saving Private Ryan 641
Schindler's List 436
Scream 371, 433

Serial Mom 227
Servant of the People 519
Seven 360
Seventh Seal, The 484, 657
Sex and the City 8
Shawshank Redemption, The 452
Shining, The 495
Shivers (It Came from Within) 282
Short Cuts 392, 433, 453
Shrek 300
Sicilia! 317
Silence of the Lambs, The 332, 358, 366, 415, 430, 456, 634
Simpsons, The 232, 342, 428, 636
Sixth Sense, The 579
Sixty Years a Queen 303
Sleepless in Seattle 453
Some Like It Hot 404
Son's Room, The 208, 354, 434, 642
Speed 452
Spider's Web 332, 357
Stachka. See *Strike*
Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace 8, 226, 446, 518
Stepford Wives, The 282
Strange Days 330
Streetcar Named Desire, A 260, 302
Strike 193, 454
Sunset Boulevard 549, 579
Superman 193, 218, 230, 353, 357, 359, 403, 441
Suzhou River 427, 579
Sweetie 330
Swimming with Sharks 332, 410
Switch 284
System Crasher 518

Taxi Driver 239, 400, 409, 411, 508, 531, 583–588, 590–591, 635
Terminator 2: Judgment Day 226, 508, 656
Terminator, The 284
That Obscure Object of Desire 202, 226, 283, 656
Thelma & Louise 442
Thing, The 226, 283
Three Men and a Baby 453
Three Musketeers, The 204, 453
Timecode 589
Titanic 349, 407–408, 611
To Have and Have Not 452, 528
Total Recall 543

- Touchez pas au Grisbi* 435
Twister 358, 407–408, 410, 454
Two or Three Things I Know about Her 283
Umberto D. 352
Un chien andalou 187, 244, 392, 395–396, 564
Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives 193, 220, 258, 432
Up 337
Usual Suspects, The 239, 327, 333
Vagabond 358
Vanilla Sky 579
Vertigo 69, 409, 435, 578
Vincent & Theo 402
Wall Street 280, 410, 414, 590
Waltz with Bashir 508
Welcome to the Dollhouse 402
West Side Story 239
When Harry Met Sally 409, 453, 528
Wild at Heart 231, 371–372
Wild One, The 231, 346
Wilhelmsburger Freitag 392
Winnetou 452
Winter's Bone 193, 243
Witness 452
Wizard of Oz, The 327, 353
Wolf 281, 315
Wonder Woman 432, 457, 636, 652
Yellow Fever 141–145, 201, 508, 517, 609, 656, 672, 677
Yin shi nan nu. See *Eat Drink Man Woman*
Zelig 279

Index of Topics

- actant 4–5, 13, 25, 33–34, 53, 67, 200, 445, 448–449
 actant role 33–34, 67, 131, 445, 447–449, 696
 acting 23, 27, 30–31, 40–41, 43, 53, 85, 92, 121, 133, 139, 151, 154, 228, 236, 243, 260, 290–291, 296–297, 300–303, 305–311, 316, 334, 342, 352, 354, 356, 366, 369, 371, 374–375, 377, 384, 388, 396, 409, 422, 427, 429, 434–435, 450, 460, 468–469, 472, 480, 533, 543, 546, 576, 581, 600, 617, 621, 623, 626–627, 645, 656, 666, 674, 676–677, 679, 682, 684, 690, 704, 709, 717, 725, 744, 746
 acting style 296–297, 305, 309, 316, 334, 354, 356, 366, 374–375, 377, 384, 429, 434, 460, 468–469, 472, 480, 623, 684, 746
 action antisocial 196, 626–627, 646–647, 667
 prosocial 285, 432, 626–627, 645–647, 667, 692, 694, 728
 social 166, 236, 244–246, 275, 620, 694
 action role 33, 41
 aesthetic convention 11, 39, 78, 106, 337, 478, 745
 aesthetic quality 292, 337, 545
 affect 14, 16, 18, 21, 28, 37–38, 43–44, 52, 68–71, 74–77, 79–81, 83, 85–88, 90, 92, 94–95, 98, 115, 118–119, 122, 131–132, 135, 146–148, 152–153, 165, 167, 171–174, 181, 184, 188, 192, 200–201, 203, 206–207, 214, 220, 227, 244, 248, 262, 268, 278, 283–284, 292, 295, 315, 323–324, 333, 340, 344, 348, 361, 366, 372–373, 377, 385, 398, 405, 415, 431, 443, 446, 451, 455, 457–458, 461–463, 471, 473, 486, 501, 511, 514, 516, 529, 531–532, 534–539, 542, 544–547, 553, 558, 562, 567, 570–571, 587, 591, 593–594, 597, 600, 603–605, 608–632, 634–636, 638–642, 644–645, 648–662, 665–668, 675, 683, 685–686, 689–695, 698, 703–705, 719–724, 728, 731–732, 734, 736–740, 744–747, 750–752
 situational 614, 625
 affective cue 570, 618, 620–621, 624–628, 631, 641–642, 645, 648, 653, 656, 661, 665–666
 affective involvement 21, 43, 119, 131, 153, 167, 172, 201, 220, 284, 295, 324, 340, 361, 366, 373, 385, 431, 443, 455, 458, 471, 473, 514, 529, 532, 534–535, 538, 547, 553, 562, 587, 591, 605, 609–610, 620, 622–624, 629–630, 645, 648, 650, 653–654, 657–658, 660–661, 666, 685, 690, 693–694, 719–721, 731, 739, 747, 750
 affect studies 131, 615–616
 agenda setting 516
 alienation 30, 217, 239, 294, 304, 308, 315, 318, 347, 349, 354–355, 361–362, 370, 372–374, 376, 378, 385–386, 481–482, 684, 697, 722
 alignment 38, 153, 541–545, 547, 570, 582, 642
 allegiance 38, 153, 541–545, 643, 646, 653–654, 660

- allegory 56, 84, 87–89, 120, 128, 359, 386, 451, 490, 497, 499, 523–524, 621, 657, 688, 746, 751
- altruism 77, 131, 193, 246, 251, 265, 271, 273, 389, 403–404, 417, 421–422, 424, 450, 463–464, 513, 515, 590, 658, 685, 693–694, 696, 712, 721, 728
- antagonist 20, 28, 53, 131, 204, 208, 315–316, 326, 331, 333, 341, 346, 389, 396, 403–405, 408, 414, 425, 429, 432, 435, 437, 441–442, 447–450, 452–456, 459–460, 463–465, 468–469, 471–472, 474, 497, 597, 600, 602, 607–608, 637, 640, 644, 646–647, 650–655, 686–687, 691, 693, 695, 697, 716, 725–726, 736
- anti-hero 31, 332, 345, 432, 463, 497–498, 528, 543, 591, 634, 636, 690, 694
- antipathy 7, 21, 69, 83, 85, 250, 270, 405, 457, 461–462, 532, 543, 555, 602, 604, 614, 620, 631–632, 644–645, 647–648, 651–652, 654, 656, 667, 692–693, 697, 722, 733
- appraisal 21, 44, 81, 83, 85, 153, 532, 534, 537, 539, 547, 571, 592, 594, 603, 609, 613, 615–616, 622, 626, 628–629, 631–639, 643–645, 650–654, 658–661, 664–665, 667, 686, 690–694, 719–722, 730–734, 740, 747
- affective 81, 85, 636, 691
- empathic 631–632, 644
- multilevel 532, 628–629
- objective 543, 547, 555, 560, 588, 628, 634
- perspectivised 21, 532, 650, 658, 667, 690, 694, 720
- subjective or group-specific 636, 638–639, 643, 645, 649, 652, 654, 667, 692–693, 721–722
- archetype 36, 133, 171, 207, 248, 277, 286–287, 342–343, 385, 447–448, 456, 495, 499, 658, 697
- artefact 17–21, 23, 43, 57–58, 64–67, 85, 87, 105, 107–111, 115, 118, 121, 123–127, 129–135, 138, 140–141, 143–150, 153, 159, 172, 174, 200, 211–212, 216, 220, 230, 278, 284, 289–292, 294, 300, 314, 323, 333, 337–339, 348, 353–354, 356, 360–362, 364, 368, 370, 372–373, 376–378, 381, 385–389, 394, 429, 434–436, 444, 460–461, 468, 472, 478–480, 484–487, 493, 499, 501, 507, 510, 513, 520, 531–532, 534, 545–546, 553, 581, 594, 610, 616–618, 620–621, 624–625, 649, 657, 662, 665–666, 672, 675–677, 679, 682–690, 694–699, 703–704, 713, 715, 719, 744–747, 749, 752–753
- communicative 58, 64–67, 338, 581, 617, 672, 679
- properties/qualities 107, 121, 147, 278, 291, 337–339, 348, 361–362, 364, 368, 370, 376, 378, 381, 385–386, 434–435, 460, 487, 499, 546, 594, 675, 682–684, 695, 704, 745
- artefact theory (of fiction) 57
- artificial intelligence (AI) 23, 47, 228, 695
- artificiality 2, 14, 17, 23, 47, 109, 126–127, 129, 133, 139, 156, 205, 217–218, 220, 226, 228, 284, 300, 308–309, 314, 317, 334, 338, 348, 350, 353–355, 370–374, 376, 438, 594, 624–625, 635, 656, 674, 694–696, 707, 713, 736, 746–747
- attention hierarchy 389, 429–433, 460, 472–474, 686–687, 697
- attractiveness 124, 150, 161–162, 165, 189, 204, 215, 228, 230, 232, 235, 242, 246, 252, 276, 278, 285, 296, 361, 378, 398, 421, 429, 432, 435, 453, 458–459, 463, 465, 469, 471, 493, 517, 585, 591, 623, 631, 635, 637–638, 645, 647, 651–652, 655, 659, 686, 690, 693, 717, 721–722
- attribution 60, 86, 152, 176, 185, 195–200, 214–215, 278, 295, 302, 357, 373, 391, 398, 552, 600, 627, 713, 715
- audiovisual style 12, 135, 312–314, 334, 481, 659, 704, 724, 731
- avatar 131, 228, 677
- awareness of communication 200, 206, 214
- awareness of fiction 78, 200, 206, 214, 617, 730
- backstory 150–151, 163, 276, 281, 288, 332, 350, 366, 399, 408–409, 411–412, 421, 454, 713–714, 720–721, 725, 727, 734
- beauty 9–10, 141–145, 167–168, 242, 285, 306, 383, 401–402, 424, 457–458, 469, 512, 517, 531, 533, 547, 572, 603, 626, 631, 635, 645–646, 651, 655, 660, 680, 694
- beauty politics 145
- behaviour
- antisocial and prosocial behaviour 198, 243, 276, 410, 415, 486. *See also* action
- behavioural model 133, 510, 513, 515–516, 524, 675, 689
- behavioural norms and expectations 139, 179, 181, 207, 247, 308, 391, 398, 420–421, 513, 613–614
- character behaviour 5, 139, 163, 187–188, 196–197, 199, 215, 223, 225, 234, 244, 250, 269, 276, 282, 306–307, 328, 332, 357, 364,

- 371, 374, 391, 393–394, 400, 404, 420, 423, 428, 457, 502, 627, 643, 709, 713
- explanation of 179, 185, 195–196, 215, 388, 397, 400, 508
- folk theories of 185
- nonverbal behaviour 135, 150, 162, 177, 194, 228–229, 236, 242, 245, 285, 456–457, 470, 596, 601, 680
- paralinguistic behaviour 229, 236, 275, 285–286
- behaviourism 179, 263, 679
- being
- fictional 42, 53–54, 58, 103, 109, 114, 118, 152–153, 155–156, 159, 200–201, 211, 221, 292
- non-human 34, 41, 46, 53, 92, 151, 152, 155, 159, 161, 178–179, 214, 220, 224, 284, 497, 507, 679, 695–696
- represented 1, 9, 19–21, 43, 54, 58, 61, 66–68, 83, 86–88, 91–92, 94, 103, 105–111, 114, 118–120, 123–136, 138, 140–141, 143, 145–153, 156, 159–160, 164, 168, 171–173, 198, 200, 204–205, 209, 211–213, 215–216, 219–221, 223, 225, 228, 275, 278–279, 284, 289–290, 292, 296, 300, 314, 323, 333, 356, 362, 377, 387–389, 391, 394, 429, 434–436, 444, 461, 478–480, 484–486, 489, 496, 501, 504, 507, 510, 513, 520, 531–532, 534–536, 545–546, 548, 551, 554, 566, 580, 598, 620–621, 624–625, 632, 645–646, 649–650, 656, 666, 672–677, 679–682, 685–692, 694–696, 698–699, 703–704, 719, 747, 749, 752–753
- Bem Sex Role Inventory 344
- Big Five personality traits 134, 264–265, 271–272, 275, 277, 287, 398, 421, 443, 681, 697, 719
- body 6, 19–20, 34, 43–44, 46, 57, 71, 76, 86, 119, 139, 142–145, 147, 154, 159, 161–162, 164–166, 170, 173–174, 178, 180–181, 183, 188, 191, 199–203, 212, 214, 216, 223–232, 241–242, 255, 257–259, 266, 275–276, 278, 281–286, 288, 293, 295–297, 299, 301, 303–308, 312–316, 318, 320–323, 329–331, 344, 349, 369, 378–379, 384, 396, 401–402, 420, 431, 435–436, 456, 483, 486, 496, 498, 517, 537–538, 542, 544, 569, 576, 597, 600, 606, 613–614, 616–617, 621, 636–638, 640–641, 646, 648, 650, 655, 674–675, 680–681, 691, 710, 715–716, 722, 733, 745–746
- 'body genres' 616, 648, 655
- body language 139, 166, 241–242, 257, 295, 307, 316, 349, 378–379, 384, 597, 648
- body type 277, 285, 710
- card (character type) 431, 697
- casting 2, 59, 154, 283, 290, 297, 300–301, 303–306, 316, 377, 383, 433, 452, 466, 469, 510, 524, 682, 701, 709–710, 746, 749–750
- categorisation 9–10, 86, 160, 176, 180–182, 206–209, 249, 262, 284, 601–603, 612, 693, 698
- social 60, 161, 174, 176, 178, 180–181, 199, 206, 214, 227, 249, 517, 601–603
- character. *See also* main character; *See also* minor character; *See also* secondary character
- aesthetics of 40, 100, 110, 293
- anthropomorphic 5, 53, 133, 152, 175, 179, 228, 255, 445
- basic structure and dimensions of 31, 43, 105–108, 126, 132, 134, 146, 676, 688–689, 698, 703, 717, 737, 747–748
- causes of 502, 507, 521, 525, 675, 688–689
- comprehensibility of 244, 308, 314–315, 326, 350–351, 366, 422, 455, 487, 745
- constitution of 13, 15–16, 43, 62, 104, 115
- definition of 51–53, 159, 178
- effects of 16, 18, 46, 62, 67, 87, 109, 120, 124, 133, 486, 506–507, 512–514, 520–521, 524, 620, 675, 689–690
- kinds of 9, 12, 32, 36, 39, 126, 173, 409, 495, 696–697, 700
- moral character 10, 191, 195, 718
- non-fictional 45, 58–59, 155, 518, 672
- ontology of 15, 23, 26, 33, 38–39, 42–45, 48, 54–55, 66, 104, 113, 672
- research on 25, 42, 104, 694
- sensuality of 82, 88–89, 132, 165, 192, 217, 291, 293, 320, 334, 338, 429, 544–545, 554, 570–571, 682, 690
- social use of 26, 43, 46
- types of properties 3, 73, 109, 115, 132–133, 337, 521, 676, 688
- character analysis 3, 7, 9, 11–12, 15, 18–20, 23, 34, 41, 51, 57–58, 64–66, 68, 70, 72, 79, 91–96, 98–101, 103–104, 107–108, 110–111, 113, 116–117, 122, 124, 126, 134, 141, 159, 161, 165, 174, 182, 184–185, 191–193, 196, 206, 220, 229, 244, 250, 255, 257, 259, 265–267, 275, 278, 284, 294, 299, 306–307, 323, 399, 401, 407, 422, 493, 506–507, 520–521, 592, 639, 677, 695, 725, 730, 739, 747

- aims of 3, 11–12, 95, 99, 147, 202, 224, 259, 266
- creative 8, 103
- interpretive 23, 481, 493, 504, 520
- principles of 91–104
- sociocultural 8–9, 14, 18, 20, 23, 32, 39–41, 47, 52, 62, 70–71, 74–75, 77, 79, 85, 89, 92, 94, 100, 103–104, 106, 121, 123, 130, 133–135, 138, 140, 146–148, 183, 188, 193, 195, 224, 233, 257, 289, 337, 343–344, 362–363, 373, 388, 458, 478, 481, 486, 501–502, 504, 507–508, 510, 520, 524, 526, 529, 535, 539, 615, 617, 619, 621–624, 637, 685, 687–688, 690–691, 695, 698, 703, 748–750, 753
- structures of 32–33, 43, 65–66, 90, 108, 117, 122, 126, 132, 135, 146, 164, 167, 291, 324, 330, 377, 405, 535, 687
- character arc 147, 279, 414–416, 418, 514, 523, 590, 697, 744
- character as artefact 87, 107, 110, 115, 121, 123, 127, 131, 134, 140, 146–147, 153, 172, 174, 216, 290–292, 294, 300, 333, 339, 353–354, 360, 372–373, 378, 388–389, 394, 478, 486, 493, 507, 520, 534, 546, 553, 620–621, 625, 657, 662, 666, 677, 682, 684, 689, 694, 697–699, 745–746
- character as communicative construct 21, 59, 91, 115, 117, 620
- character as represented or fictional being 1, 9, 19–21, 42, 54, 58, 61, 66–68, 83, 88, 91–92, 105, 107–111, 114, 119, 125–127, 130–136, 138, 141, 143, 145–146, 149–156, 159–160, 164, 168, 171–173, 198, 200–201, 205, 209, 211–212, 215, 220, 223, 225, 228, 275, 279, 284, 289–290, 292, 296, 300, 314, 323, 356, 377, 387, 389, 391, 429, 434–436, 444, 461, 478–480, 485–486, 496, 504, 513, 520, 531–532, 534–536, 545–546, 548, 551, 554, 566, 580, 598, 621, 624–625, 632, 645–646, 649–650, 656, 672, 675–677, 679–682, 685–687, 689–692, 694–696, 703–704, 719, 747, 749, 753
- character as symbol 106, 109–110, 123, 128, 132, 135, 140, 148, 159, 172, 323, 359–360, 377, 484, 489–490, 496–497, 499, 507, 522–524, 594, 621, 657, 661, 666, 676–677, 694, 752
- character as symptom 106, 109–110, 120–121, 123–124, 132–133, 148, 172, 323, 388, 478, 484, 496, 502–504, 506–507, 520–521, 524, 529, 620, 657, 666, 687, 748
- character chart 437–438, 440
- Character Clock 19, 113–114, 117, 124, 126, 129–132, 134, 136, 141, 145–146, 289, 291, 675–678, 695–696, 698–699
- character conception 30–31, 34, 53, 59–60, 65–66, 68, 70, 73, 80, 86, 92, 114, 130, 147, 192, 339, 353–354, 359, 361–365, 367–370, 372–374, 376, 378, 382, 386, 434, 682, 684, 695, 716, 745
- postmodern 372–373
- character configuration 429, 669, 731. *See also* configuration: scenic
- character constellation 7, 14, 20, 35, 40–41, 90, 130–131, 146–147, 154, 218, 248, 253, 301–302, 320, 339, 341, 346, 351, 387, 389, 414, 423, 427–428, 434, 436–438, 440–441, 443–445, 449, 452, 454–456, 458, 460–462, 464–467, 471–474, 493, 496–497, 499, 514, 543, 594, 602, 610, 625, 649, 666–667, 676, 685–687, 689, 695, 697, 699, 705, 723
- character context 327
- character cues 622–623, 627
- character design 125, 151, 233, 623
- character development 83, 151, 160, 280, 283, 323, 330, 522
- character engagement 68, 536, 538, 540, 605, 616
- character function 396, 448–449, 451, 494, 587, 668
- character growth 280
- character information 303, 323–328, 377–378, 683
- character involvement 579, 592, 602, 610, 619, 623, 627, 645, 662
- characterisation 6, 10, 13, 20, 26, 28, 30–31, 34–35, 38, 40, 42, 45, 48, 131, 133, 152–155, 167, 170, 196, 198, 209, 220, 230, 236–239, 242–243, 279, 291, 294, 296–300, 302, 305, 313, 317–318, 320, 323, 326, 328, 330–335, 351, 362, 367, 369, 377–379, 384, 389, 407, 433, 437, 441, 468, 471, 492, 651, 654, 682–684, 686, 691, 708, 710–711, 713–715, 719, 724
- characterisation by others 237, 379, 384, 710
- phases of 330, 333, 335, 683
- self-characterisation 237, 294, 379, 384, 714
- character model, mental 20, 65–66, 68, 83, 86–92, 94, 103–104, 109–111, 115, 119–123, 125, 135, 152, 155–159, 163–168, 170–173, 176, 178–180, 184–185, 192–194, 198–200, 203–209, 211–213, 215–218, 223, 225, 253–255, 274, 278, 283, 285, 288–289, 291, 295,

- 302, 305, 316, 324, 329–334, 338–340, 346, 348–349, 353–354, 357–359, 361, 377–378, 388, 433, 484–485, 498, 557, 569, 594, 596, 605, 620–621, 623–628, 673–674, 679, 683, 708, 710–711, 713, 715
- character model, structure of the 198, 334, 623, 625
- character psyche 15, 134, 229, 244, 249, 253–257, 259–260, 262–263, 266–267, 285, 287, 484, 492, 672, 679, 696
- character reception 14–15, 17, 21, 32, 38, 40, 43–44, 59–60, 62–65, 67–70, 72, 79–80, 85–88, 90–91, 93, 96, 98, 100, 102–105, 109–110, 113, 115–120, 122, 134, 138, 146–147, 152–153, 172–175, 187, 198–201, 203–205, 212, 214–215, 257, 266–267, 296, 299, 323, 348, 485–486, 501, 504, 512, 531, 540, 546, 566, 594, 605, 683
- character synthesis 41, 80, 152, 154, 170–171, 173–174, 206, 209, 212, 218–220, 245, 348, 362–363, 365, 377, 480, 541, 545, 596, 622, 708, 715
- character theory
- cognitive 14, 16, 35, 37–38, 42, 47, 65, 70–74, 77, 79, 87, 93, 97, 111, 134, 262, 479, 504, 604, 616–617, 652, 676, 694, 696
 - feminist 35–37, 40, 466, 479, 483, 602, 616, 638, 651
 - hermeneutic 15, 30–32, 39, 41, 46–47, 65, 70–72, 74, 97, 111, 134, 255, 257, 264, 687
 - psychoanalytical 15, 35–37, 39–40, 70, 102–103, 144, 151, 262–263, 287, 366, 393, 400, 406, 420, 448, 479, 481, 483, 489, 495, 538, 540, 616, 638, 642, 676, 687
 - structuralist-semiotic 32–35
- character trait 7, 9, 154, 161, 163–164, 185, 192, 197–198, 213, 216, 223, 227, 229, 273, 356, 368, 375, 379, 469, 540, 543, 627, 631, 711, 713, 720
- character types 14, 16, 26, 28, 40–42, 45, 78, 114, 203–204, 214, 244, 261, 277, 287, 304, 340, 342–343, 361, 374, 382, 386, 420, 451, 498–499, 516, 520, 623, 656, 676, 681, 695, 698, 718
- cinematic judgement 738–739, 751
- cinetherapy 519
- class 8–9, 40, 77, 94, 162, 168, 182–183, 227, 247, 277, 303, 344, 346, 355, 435, 445, 463–466, 473, 483, 491, 495, 602, 623, 647, 651, 680, 692, 695, 704, 710–711, 719, 721, 747
- closeness
- affective 594, 600, 603–604, 608, 691, 731–732, 737
 - imaginative 21, 148, 318, 325, 361, 423, 471, 473–474, 534, 592–593, 595, 602, 604–606, 608, 627, 644, 650–651, 656, 691, 721–723, 730–731, 733–735, 739–740, 743, 746
 - social 602–604, 608, 629, 691–692, 731
 - spatio-temporal 598, 600, 603–604
- close-up 52, 57, 86, 90, 107, 110, 142, 170, 201, 225, 233, 269, 296, 298, 306, 314, 319, 382–383, 458, 544, 563, 572–573, 578, 593, 599, 605–606, 618, 627, 642–643, 661, 664, 682, 691, 704–705, 709, 723–724, 731–733, 741, 746
- clothing 84, 106, 128, 140, 144, 154, 166, 184, 194, 213, 228, 230–231, 241–242, 245, 285–286, 313, 316–317, 321, 324, 329, 371, 462, 477, 516, 526, 680, 712
- code 32, 37, 61, 70–72, 74, 78, 93, 170, 175, 255, 257, 310, 315, 435, 506, 510, 656
- cognition 37, 44, 47, 69, 71, 73, 75, 79, 81, 84, 95, 101, 174, 176–178, 187–188, 196, 198–200, 203, 205–206, 214, 246, 256, 258, 268–269, 271, 275, 287, 371, 374, 391, 531, 536, 564, 602–603, 612–614, 620, 628, 668, 681, 692
- social 174, 176–178, 198–200, 203, 205–206, 214, 374, 602–603
- cognitive science 47, 83, 134, 266, 268, 539, 616, 681
- coherence 28, 71, 133, 216, 218, 338, 347–348, 350, 353–355, 391, 417, 422, 487, 622
- collective memory 2, 340, 528
- colourism 141, 145
- comic distance 590
- communication
- nonverbal 150, 162, 177, 228–229, 242, 245, 285, 457, 470, 596, 680
 - representational and meta-representational 59, 62, 64–66, 68, 93, 116
- complexity 3, 9, 16–17, 48–49, 88, 111, 124, 145, 151, 182, 209, 215, 217, 238, 248, 276, 300, 323, 338, 350, 354–355, 361–362, 365, 378, 427, 429, 458, 460, 469, 472, 482, 487, 520–521, 572, 588, 622, 628, 658, 675, 682–683, 694, 696, 719, 745
- comprehension 89, 481, 484
- vs interpretation 89
- configuration 104, 239, 278, 428–429, 431, 440, 442, 462, 467, 472, 661, 669, 725, 731
- scenic 428, 442, 462, 472, 731

- conflict 4, 8, 20, 70, 74, 77, 131, 143–144, 147, 151, 156, 161–162, 166, 180, 189, 192, 194, 201, 213, 230, 239, 244, 246–253, 260–263, 271, 279, 283, 287, 301–302, 305, 308, 314, 316, 322, 327, 330–331, 333, 338, 342, 345–346, 355–356, 366, 372, 378–383, 385, 387, 389, 391–392, 399, 401–408, 410–416, 418–422, 424–425, 427, 429, 431–432, 435, 438, 440–443, 448, 450, 452, 454–455, 457–460, 462, 465, 467–468, 470–473, 479, 482, 489, 492, 494, 497–499, 508, 513, 524, 533, 591, 603–604, 607, 610, 615, 621, 624, 626–627, 632, 634–635, 638–639, 644, 648, 651, 653–655, 658, 660, 664–665, 667–668, 674, 680–681, 685–686, 690, 693–694, 704–705, 711, 713, 718–720, 722–726, 729–730, 733, 735–738, 740, 743–747, 751–752
 inner 143–144, 189, 192, 249, 253, 271, 355–356, 378, 381–382, 385, 418–419, 421, 425, 442, 454, 462, 660, 664, 681, 685, 726, 729, 752
 motivational 402, 407, 419, 425
 conflict constellation 455, 460, 465, 651, 726, 729
 consistency 28, 48, 111, 147, 184, 197–198, 216, 249, 291, 338, 347, 354–356, 361, 365–366, 378, 384, 421, 434, 487, 623, 683, 745
 construction (of characters or character-related signs) 21, 28, 30, 34, 38, 59, 160, 289, 296, 303, 306–307, 317, 333, 355, 377–378
 contagion 131, 542, 631, 640, 643, 648, 650, 654–655, 668, 693–694, 720, 728
 affective contagion 542, 640, 650, 654–655, 668, 720, 728
 antagonist 446–448, 450, 726
 context model 85, 87, 120, 157, 505–506
 contrast character 441, 451, 472, 697
 corporeality 17, 146, 163, 225–226, 228–229, 285, 290, 391, 434, 486, 679, 708. *See also* physicality
 cue 37, 71–72, 154, 173, 177, 193, 294, 323, 356, 464, 481–482, 484, 486, 495, 543, 570, 572, 581, 610, 612–613, 615, 617–628, 631, 633, 640–642, 644–646, 648, 650, 652–653, 656, 661–666, 673, 682–684, 688
 affective 570, 612, 618, 620–621, 624–628, 631, 641–642, 645, 648, 653, 656, 661, 665–666
 cultivation 516–517, 520, 529, 689
 curiosity 83, 85, 131, 165, 168, 291, 324, 328, 330, 333, 373–374, 377, 380–381, 396, 404–405, 423, 443, 448, 451, 538, 575, 583, 591–592, 619, 623, 627, 630, 640, 642, 646, 650, 653–654, 658, 663, 665–666, 668, 683–685, 690, 697, 720–725, 735, 737, 745
 cuteness 626, 637, 646, 655, 668
 deconstruction 35, 201, 217, 278, 283, 340, 375, 656
 DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) 517
 description, thick 11, 96
 desire 10, 35–36, 53, 70, 131, 137, 139, 141, 143, 165–166, 168, 187, 192–193, 195–196, 202, 227–228, 238, 256, 258, 261–264, 271, 273–274, 280–281, 305, 309, 350, 375, 398–399, 404–405, 409, 411, 419–422, 424, 427, 444, 448, 483, 491, 496, 498–499, 502, 504, 510, 513, 519, 525, 528, 532–534, 536, 538–540, 544, 546–547, 553–555, 565, 567, 570–571, 576, 583, 587–588, 592, 597–598, 603–604, 607, 613, 615–616, 622–623, 625–631, 633–634, 637–639, 643, 645–647, 649, 651–652, 654–657, 659–661, 664, 666, 668, 681, 684–685, 688–691, 693–694, 696, 718, 721–722, 728, 732, 734, 739–740, 743
 dialogue 5, 16, 34, 57, 59, 119, 121, 139, 151, 154, 156, 164, 166, 170, 203, 225–226, 236–238, 241–242, 262, 269, 286, 294, 296–297, 301, 315, 325–327, 330, 333, 335, 356, 366, 372, 374, 378–381, 384–385, 427, 430–431, 435–436, 451, 454, 458, 469–470, 482, 491, 494, 496, 509, 525, 541, 543–544, 563, 570–572, 575, 577, 581, 587, 597, 599, 605, 627, 633, 645–648, 658, 664–666, 683, 691, 704, 708–711, 713–715, 717, 727–728, 732, 736, 743, 745–746
 diegesis 81, 83, 105, 107–109, 120, 123, 126, 129, 143, 315, 326, 338–340, 356, 361, 364, 371, 389, 393–394, 396, 429, 435, 444, 472, 484, 496, 546, 564, 577, 579–583, 585, 588, 640, 656, 664, 686–687, 695–696, 698, 703, 744. *See also* storyworld; *See also* world, represented or fictional
 disability 9, 45, 277, 647, 680
 discourse 4, 13, 21, 28, 33, 39, 43, 47, 55, 85, 87, 91, 96–97, 103, 105, 108–109, 120, 134, 148, 157, 185, 206, 248, 257, 295, 297, 337, 361, 461, 483, 486, 498, 505, 508, 510, 518–519, 522, 529, 689, 698, 701, 703, 730, 735, 737–738, 744, 748–752
 discrimination 3, 39, 47, 142, 181, 184, 209, 217, 292, 344, 438, 440, 443, 498, 503, 506, 516–517, 671, 676, 689, 694, 698, 749, 751

- disposition
 affective or emotional 77, 98, 174, 191–192, 203–204, 256, 614, 622–623, 628, 631, 644, 653, 659, 666–667
 medial or media-specific 19, 173, 200
 mental 19, 59–60, 71, 73–74, 77, 86, 90, 94, 97–98, 102, 114, 133–134, 152, 155–156, 158, 170–173, 175, 177–178, 185, 199, 206, 209, 220, 248, 252, 255, 264, 283, 348, 431, 510, 519–520, 530, 546, 556, 596, 703
 text-generated or text-specific 174, 214
- disposition theory 191
- distance 18, 21, 30, 137, 139, 148, 166, 175, 187–188, 200–201, 234–235, 241, 309, 318, 322, 352, 365, 369, 372–373, 384, 429, 461, 463–464, 473–474, 532, 534, 536–537, 540, 545, 560, 563, 569, 576, 581, 590–597, 599–600, 602–605, 608–610, 627, 629, 635, 644, 650, 656, 691–692, 694, 697, 708, 712, 722, 728, 730–732, 734–735, 740, 746. *See also* closeness
- distribution of information. *See* information distribution
- diversity 12, 22, 37, 45–46, 48, 72, 118, 182, 257, 304, 323, 362, 364, 367, 510, 533, 538, 615, 649, 671, 694, 696, 724
- doppelganger 226, 239, 282, 435–436, 495
- dramaturgy 6, 9, 28, 90, 121, 160, 189, 192, 204, 214, 224, 250, 259, 368
- drive 35, 70, 77, 107, 121, 123, 131, 179, 191, 228, 260–263, 269, 271, 359–360, 366, 379, 388, 391, 398–399, 408–409, 419–420, 423–424, 454, 508, 536, 616, 628, 636, 710, 719–720, 723, 726
- dynamics 70, 194–196, 214, 286, 428, 446, 462, 512, 647–648
 levels of 462
- editing 43, 74, 79, 92, 95, 121, 133, 154, 201, 233, 253, 269, 290, 295–298, 300–301, 312, 314–315, 319–320, 322–323, 334, 350, 352, 357, 377, 379, 382–383, 430–431, 435, 464, 480–481, 496, 535, 537, 541–542, 544, 570, 572, 589, 597, 599, 605–606, 641, 645, 661, 677, 682, 704–705, 707, 715, 720, 727, 732, 741, 745–746
- egoism 106, 131, 389, 464, 685, 712, 730
- elaboration (after reception) 100–101, 103, 110–111, 115–117, 122, 190, 359, 545
- emotion 2–3, 14, 44, 69, 72–77, 80–81, 83–85, 92, 94–95, 101, 105, 131–133, 137–139, 148, 150, 159, 163, 165, 174, 178, 181, 187–189, 199, 233, 235–236, 243, 246, 248, 250–253, 256, 258, 263, 268–269, 275–276, 279, 285, 287, 292, 308–309, 318, 342, 344, 365–366, 369–370, 380, 391, 394, 398–399, 403, 411, 424, 446–447, 451, 457, 465, 480, 482, 484, 495, 498, 511, 514–515, 518, 532, 537–538, 543, 545–546, 549–550, 553, 562, 564–565, 568, 571, 597–598, 607, 609–619, 621–623, 625–627, 629, 632, 637, 639–648, 652, 654–655, 658–662, 666–667, 681, 690–692, 694, 707, 713, 715, 717, 720–721, 723, 728, 730, 734–735, 740, 743–744, 752
 theories of 615, 617
- empathy 21, 30, 38, 41, 44, 47, 70, 77, 80, 83, 85, 88, 131, 144–145, 153–154, 172, 188, 204, 206, 208, 215, 227, 238, 250, 256, 259, 271, 284, 315, 330, 332, 340, 362, 369, 373, 378, 381, 392, 405, 411, 462, 473, 498, 510, 512, 515, 532–533, 535, 538, 541–545, 547–548, 565–570, 590–591, 593, 597, 605, 608, 614, 620, 623, 625–626, 628, 631–632, 639–649, 653–656, 659–661, 667–668, 683, 685, 689–690, 692, 697, 720–721, 723, 727–728, 733, 738, 744, 746
- definition of 639
- imaginative 640, 642–643, 645, 648, 653–654, 659, 668
- projective 641–642, 653, 659, 720
- scene of 727, 744
- situational 641, 668, 720
- somatic 144, 227, 642, 646, 659, 668, 720, 728
- ending 138, 203, 261, 280–281, 328, 330–333, 335, 346, 370, 380–381, 385, 392, 405, 410–411, 414, 438, 463, 468, 564, 660, 683, 739
 types of 414
- Entertainment-Education 514–516, 518, 689, 795
- environment 14, 66, 71, 73, 77, 82, 94, 105, 119, 133, 136, 139–140, 149, 157, 160, 163, 170, 172–173, 176, 179, 182, 204, 214–215, 228–229, 239–240, 242, 247, 249, 258, 270, 273, 275, 278–279, 281, 285–286, 291, 293, 295, 299, 314, 317, 321, 328, 331, 334, 343, 351, 353, 356, 369, 376, 383, 388, 398, 421, 423, 425, 440, 443, 498, 505, 536, 550, 552, 565, 569, 578, 581, 588, 598–599, 620, 624, 636, 671, 688, 704
- ethnicity 9, 166, 182, 247, 276–277, 303, 345–346, 465–466, 602, 626, 638, 655, 680, 749

- evaluation 26, 28, 38, 60, 85, 87, 92, 100, 131–132, 140, 153, 165, 187, 245, 256, 269, 287, 337, 339, 389, 404, 447, 458–459, 461, 471, 474, 480, 503, 510, 532, 537, 540, 542, 544–545, 547, 554, 556, 559, 562, 564–565, 567, 569, 571, 576, 580, 582, 586–588, 592, 597, 602, 605, 609, 612–613, 615–616, 623, 626, 628, 636, 638–639, 646, 651, 659–660, 666–668, 681, 689–692, 698, 732, 745–747, 752
- exempla 75–77, 79, 84, 106, 171, 181, 189, 453, 688
- exemplification 120, 360, 490, 494, 496
- expectation 3, 61, 69–71, 74–76, 83, 87, 114, 138, 163, 166, 173, 177, 179, 182, 185, 187, 192, 194, 197, 204, 207–209, 217, 226, 239, 245–249, 251, 256, 276, 281, 288, 301, 308, 315, 324, 328, 330–332, 348, 353, 355, 373, 377, 382, 394, 398, 407, 421, 424, 433, 455, 537, 539, 558, 704–705, 711, 746
- explanation of behaviour. *See* behaviour: explanation of
- exposition 37, 146, 291, 328, 330–332, 366, 378, 380, 575, 650, 652, 654, 658, 683–684, 699, 704, 711, 715, 721, 737
- expression 1, 15, 20, 56, 83, 88, 109, 139, 150, 154, 163–164, 166, 177, 181, 188, 201, 206, 213, 228–229, 232–234, 236, 239, 241–242, 244, 259, 264, 275, 285–286, 292, 294–296, 300–301, 307–309, 312, 315, 317, 326, 328–329, 340, 344, 357, 361, 366, 369, 374, 378–380, 384–385, 417, 429, 457, 483, 490, 494, 496, 502, 505, 528, 532, 537, 540, 542–543, 546, 558, 563, 568, 576, 596–597, 611–613, 620, 627–628, 631, 640, 642, 648, 653–654, 659, 661, 663–665, 667–668, 676, 679–680, 692–694, 704, 707, 709–710, 715–717, 720, 723, 725, 727, 731–732, 741–742, 744, 746
- face 43, 48, 51, 86, 121, 127, 139, 141, 144, 153–154, 165–168, 170, 194, 225–227, 229, 232–233, 239–242, 249, 259, 269, 275, 283, 293, 295–296, 300, 304, 307–308, 310, 314–315, 317–319, 322, 332, 344, 354, 369, 374, 378, 380, 382–384, 402, 404, 414, 424, 431, 447–448, 454, 470–471, 533, 535, 543, 547, 567, 572–573, 575, 590, 593, 601, 605–606, 614–615, 618, 627, 640, 655, 661, 663, 680, 682, 684, 691, 705, 707–710, 717, 720, 723–724, 727, 731, 733, 739, 741
- Facial Affect Coding System (FACS) 233
- facial expression 83, 163–164, 166, 177, 188, 201, 213, 228–229, 232–234, 241–242, 244, 259, 275, 285–286, 292, 294–296, 300–301, 307–308, 315, 317, 326, 329, 369, 378–380, 384, 528, 532, 540, 542–543, 546, 558, 563, 576, 597, 613, 640, 648, 659, 663–665, 704, 715, 732, 744, 746
- fantasy 1, 35–37, 156, 159, 179–180, 227, 258, 281, 316–317, 353, 400, 404, 463, 466, 483, 494, 511–513, 515, 527–529, 534, 539, 578–579, 606, 613, 636, 659–660, 695–696
- feeling 2, 16, 38, 51, 58–59, 69, 76, 78, 83–84, 88, 131, 136, 139–140, 143–145, 150–154, 156, 162–163, 166–167, 170, 172, 174, 176, 178, 181, 185, 187–192, 194, 213, 215, 218, 226–227, 232–234, 239, 248, 253, 256, 258, 261, 264–265, 270–271, 273, 277–278, 284, 287, 294, 307, 314, 325, 330, 332, 349, 353, 359, 367, 370, 372, 374, 380, 383–384, 391, 395, 399, 401–402, 405, 421, 455–457, 461–464, 473, 486, 493, 497, 508, 510, 513, 521, 528, 532–535, 537, 540–544, 551–555, 557–559, 563–564, 567–572, 576–577, 579, 582–583, 585–592, 594, 596–605, 607, 609, 611–615, 617–620, 622, 624–626, 628–629, 631–633, 635–648, 651–655, 659–662, 664–665, 667–668, 672, 679, 681, 691–693, 711, 714, 718, 720, 722–723, 727–729, 731–732, 734–735, 740, 743, 752
- feeling-for 646
- feeling-with 631, 640, 646–647, 667
- femme fatale 14, 42, 76, 174, 204, 207, 497, 567, 635, 647, 651, 656, 695, 697
- fetishism 483, 508, 538, 638
- ficelle (character type) 431, 697
- fiction 40, 54, 57, 59, 62, 67, 82, 105, 143, 155, 161, 180, 199–200, 205–206, 214, 227, 231, 258, 277, 317, 347–348, 352–353, 367, 399, 465, 512, 616, 618, 624, 706, 753. *See also* awareness of fiction; *See also* being: fictional; *See also* world, represented or fictional
- fictionality 45, 54, 78, 88, 617, 730
- fictional minds 41, 44
- figure 137, 143, 159, 174, 191, 201, 205, 251, 255, 262, 286, 294–295, 305, 309, 321, 331, 353, 358–359, 361, 389, 408, 448, 451–452, 469, 483, 489, 498–499, 515, 518, 528–529, 536, 539, 543, 565, 572, 575, 577, 603–604, 638, 645, 672, 688–689, 694, 703–704, 751, 760
- film noir 14, 76, 198, 231, 315, 357, 448, 459, 496–497, 634, 651, 656, 686

- film reception 68–69, 78–81, 97, 114, 538, 619–620, 676
- filter, character as 582, 586–587, 589, 600, 607
- final girl 243
- flat versus round characters (E. M. Forster) 30, 34, 48, 339, 356–357
- flaw 281, 316, 407, 409–412, 414–419, 421, 424, 448, 450, 457, 467–469, 637, 685–686, 697, 726, 730, 752
- key flaw 407, 409–412, 415, 417–419, 421, 457, 685–686, 726, 730
- focalisation 326, 351, 429, 433, 535, 537, 541, 548–549, 552, 564, 582, 588–589, 640, 691
- focaliser 431–432, 451, 472, 582, 587, 697
- folk psychology 19, 32, 60, 73, 134, 147, 176–178, 184–188, 191–192, 195, 199, 201, 224, 232, 254–260, 263, 266–269, 273–274, 307, 369, 371, 397, 486, 517, 571, 592, 681, 723
- folk theories 170, 176–178, 185, 253, 349, 400–401
- force, antagonistic 414, 425, 442, 449
- fragmentation 192, 321, 339, 351, 513, 674, 694
- gangster 52, 106, 182, 205, 327, 333, 337, 341–342, 354, 370, 372, 382, 384, 394, 402–403, 414, 497, 525, 604, 633–634, 647, 656, 697
- gaze 23, 229, 232, 241–242, 253, 269–271, 384, 431, 470, 482, 537, 568, 572–573, 577, 643, 658, 663–664, 680, 709, 711, 720, 722, 742
- gender 8–9, 23, 36–37, 40, 45–46, 60, 77, 162–163, 182–183, 188, 227, 234, 243, 247, 277, 282, 344, 346, 384, 406, 466, 473, 504–505, 522, 524, 528, 538, 547, 602, 623, 626, 631, 638, 647, 651–652, 655, 680, 683, 695, 711, 721–722, 737–738, 749
- gender role 36, 247, 282, 344, 384, 406, 504, 522, 524, 528, 538, 638, 655, 721–722, 749
- genre 5, 7–8, 12, 14, 19, 28–29, 36, 39–40, 43, 52, 60, 78–79, 90, 98, 114, 138, 147, 160–161, 168, 173–174, 180, 192, 203–205, 207, 214, 244, 253, 258, 279–281, 287, 290, 297, 301–302, 307, 309, 316–317, 324–325, 331, 334, 341–342, 346, 349–351, 355, 360, 371–376, 382, 393–394, 400–401, 405, 414, 427, 434, 437, 445, 459, 463, 465, 481, 497–499, 504–506, 509, 520, 533, 543, 547, 558, 589, 598, 601, 610, 616, 618, 648, 651–652, 655–656, 668, 673, 681–682, 684, 690, 695, 697–700
- genre type 192, 204, 374, 695, 697
- gesture 154, 163, 177, 229, 231, 234–235, 244, 275, 285, 296, 300–301, 307–309, 317, 329, 354, 374–376, 540, 576, 599, 640, 659, 663, 680, 716, 718, 723, 746
- social 374–376, 716
- give and take 250, 403
- goal 18, 26, 28, 30–31, 36, 39, 48–49, 61–62, 64, 69, 91–93, 96, 98, 100, 102, 110, 114–115, 117, 126, 131, 136–137, 140, 146, 152, 179, 187, 189, 193, 205, 245, 256, 266–267, 276, 280, 282, 284, 351, 358, 366–367, 369–370, 372, 389, 391–392, 394, 396, 398–399, 401, 403–419, 423–424, 429, 432, 440, 442, 445–454, 463, 467–468, 472, 479, 482, 505–506, 527, 540, 554, 585, 593, 597–598, 604, 607, 612, 615, 622, 632, 644, 653, 658, 666, 668, 685, 692–693, 696, 699, 721, 723–724, 726, 728–729, 732–734, 740, 745
- grouping 166, 440, 467, 470
- group membership 162, 182, 184, 207, 213, 249–250, 277, 343, 346, 519, 602–603, 638, 694
- halo effect 194, 199, 215, 357, 709, 715
- hegemony 466, 522
- helper (plot role) 33, 204, 394, 431, 444–447, 450, 452, 455, 460, 463–466, 468, 472, 474, 602, 634, 651–652, 686–687, 697, 726
- hermeneutics 15, 30–31, 39, 41, 46–47, 65, 70–72, 74, 97, 111, 126, 134, 147, 257, 264, 369, 566, 622, 687
- hero's journey 280, 444, 447–448, 482, 651
- hierarchy 122, 131, 142, 144, 246, 366, 373, 375, 389, 406, 429–433, 457, 460, 471–474, 559, 581, 633, 686–687, 697
- hierarchy of attention. *See* attention hierarchy
- homo fictus 30
- humanity. *See* image of humanity
- hybridity 46, 54, 129, 133, 205, 220, 228, 282, 284, 373, 679, 696
- icon (iconic character) 294, 527, 690
- iconography 109, 204, 233, 258, 302, 479, 705
- identification 2–3, 21, 31, 35–39, 41, 44, 69–70, 80, 86–88, 124, 131, 153, 181, 188, 204–205, 246, 260–261, 305, 365, 367, 372, 408, 437, 448, 451–452, 460–461, 464–465, 494, 510, 515, 519, 532, 535–536, 538–541, 547–548, 565–570, 591, 593, 603, 605, 608–609, 616, 622, 624–626, 639, 641–643, 645, 647–649, 651–652, 656, 659, 664, 668, 689–690, 693–694, 715, 738–739
- definition of 565–567, 569

- wishful 643, 645, 659
- identity 1, 7, 13, 37, 53, 61, 74, 95, 131–132, 138, 158, 161, 170, 178–181, 192, 207, 209, 214, 220, 223, 231, 244–246, 249, 252–253, 266, 273–276, 282–286, 302, 304, 337, 351–352, 364, 367, 371, 373, 376, 379, 389, 417, 421–425, 441, 453, 467, 474, 482–483, 491, 495, 511, 516, 519–520, 526, 528–529, 538, 547, 565, 567–568, 585, 594, 597, 602–603, 609, 615, 618, 621, 623, 626, 636, 642, 647, 662, 664, 666, 680, 689, 697, 715–717, 725, 749
- personal 61, 249, 603
- social 181, 209, 214, 244–245, 286, 474, 519, 568, 602, 615, 666, 680, 697, 749
- identity formation 170, 249, 273, 422–423, 516, 519–520, 529, 689
- ideology 2, 28, 36, 71, 163, 248, 310, 364, 434, 442–443, 456, 466, 471, 479–480, 483, 508, 510–511, 525, 538, 608, 621, 689
- image of humanity 376, 684, 716
- imagination 1, 6, 21, 43, 51, 54, 61, 68–69, 81, 88, 95, 156–157, 159–160, 162, 188, 263–264, 283, 314, 346, 482, 498, 511, 533, 536, 541, 544, 547, 555, 559, 567, 570–571, 577, 579, 582, 591, 593, 596, 603, 612–613, 625, 631, 641–642, 645, 672–673, 679, 691, 693, 728
- acentral vs central 541–545, 547, 555
- imagined interaction 131, 516, 601
- imitation 18, 27, 69, 172, 511, 513, 515, 517, 528–529, 559, 566, 689
- immersion 44, 83, 90, 354, 372, 538, 548, 656, 703
- impression management 272, 603–604
- inattentional blindness 73, 157
- independent realism. *See* realism: independent
- individualisation 207–209, 217, 338–340, 354, 361, 365, 382, 434, 524, 710, 715, 745
- inference 19, 32, 61, 74, 80–82, 84, 87, 91–92, 94–95, 100–101, 108–111, 115, 118, 120–122, 125, 133, 147, 154, 158, 164, 167, 171–172, 177, 197–198, 213, 220, 223, 239, 295–296, 299, 380, 433, 478, 484, 486, 492, 495, 507, 552, 592, 620, 674, 685, 689–690, 715
- information, character-related. *See* character information
- information distribution 337, 362, 377, 379, 431, 546–547, 556
- information processing 71, 74, 76–77, 84, 86, 95, 134, 152, 174, 179, 214, 262–263, 348
- information transfer. *See* transference
- inner life 1, 6, 30, 43, 53–54, 69, 114, 122, 135–137, 150, 159, 166, 175–176, 178, 180, 184–185, 187–190, 194–196, 211–212, 240, 244, 252, 254–256, 260, 268–269, 275, 287, 290, 295–296, 299, 314, 318, 358, 364–365, 369, 371, 377–378, 380–382, 386, 391, 451, 473, 480, 533, 538, 542–544, 548, 552, 556, 559, 562–564, 568, 570–571, 577, 579, 585, 588–590, 592, 596–598, 601, 605, 626–627, 642, 660, 672, 674, 676, 681, 691, 708, 723, 745
- integrity 106, 120, 166–167, 193, 241, 252, 388, 405, 417, 421–423, 425, 467–468, 471, 478, 522–523, 528, 553, 631, 659, 664–665, 674, 686, 688, 693, 734
- intentionality 53–54, 60–61, 66–67, 159, 162, 170, 178, 180, 284, 521, 551, 556–557
- interaction
- parasocial 1, 17, 21, 38, 68–69, 80, 131, 149, 175, 501, 510, 512, 519, 531–532, 538–539, 548, 594, 601, 604–605, 608, 690, 692, 694, 696
- social 46, 100, 163, 167, 212, 242, 252, 263, 286, 455–457, 461, 501, 603–604, 606, 626
- interpretation 7–12, 18, 20, 22, 25–26, 29–31, 34–36, 59, 63, 70, 72, 80–81, 89, 94–96, 98–101, 106, 114–115, 122–123, 136, 138, 179–180, 190, 193–194, 198, 214, 224, 227, 233, 260, 264, 266–267, 275, 360, 381, 389, 391, 396, 400, 406–407, 421, 427–428, 440, 447, 455–456, 471, 478–487, 490–493, 495–497, 499, 501–502, 504, 508, 511, 520, 522–524, 530, 546, 609, 613, 660, 665, 679, 681, 687, 689, 695–696, 698, 725, 737–739, 747–749, 752–753
- biographical 748–749
- theory of 20, 99, 479–481, 484, 490
- vs analysis 480–481
- intersectionality 36–37, 184, 337, 346, 438, 474, 638, 651, 697, 737
- intersubjectivity 65, 486, 622, 635, 660
- intertextuality 9, 43, 106, 129, 203, 214, 231, 303, 325, 334, 371–372, 388, 394, 444, 451, 479, 504, 509–510, 525–526, 528, 658, 686, 690
- involvement
- affective 21, 43, 119, 131, 153, 167, 172, 201, 220, 284, 295, 324, 340, 361, 366, 373, 385, 431, 443, 455, 458, 471, 473, 514, 529, 532, 534–535, 538, 547, 553, 562, 587, 591, 605, 609–610, 620, 622–624, 629–630, 645, 648, 650, 653–654, 657–658, 660–661, 666, 685, 690, 693–694, 719–721, 731, 739, 747, 750

- typical forms of 531–532, 537, 565, 601, 620, 630, 650, 657
- isolationism 52, 522, 661
- isolation (of a character in a constellation) 131, 251, 389, 440
- joint attention 641, 643, 648
- justice 3, 22, 39, 131, 177, 181–182, 193, 250–251, 360, 400, 405, 701, 712, 725–726, 729, 735, 737, 739–740, 743, 749–751
- vigilante 701, 726, 729, 735
- kalokagathía* 635, 649
- language (as part of characterisation) 78, 92, 119, 121, 133, 135, 165, 170, 223–225, 236–238, 324, 351, 677
- law film 738
- learning 61, 145, 170, 175, 188, 280, 318, 366–367, 370, 415–416, 469, 511, 513–517, 520, 528–529, 540, 689
- observational 513–514, 520, 528–529, 689
- LGBTQIA+ 36, 45, 466
- live-action 141–145, 278, 291, 301, 496, 688
- main character 21, 129, 173, 189, 193, 208, 216, 218, 222, 237, 248, 279–280, 283, 316, 327–328, 331, 333, 362, 379, 387, 389, 406–408, 411, 418, 427, 429–436, 438–439, 442, 453–454, 459–460, 462–464, 467–468, 472, 474, 492, 494, 506, 522, 528, 533, 543, 578, 587, 589–590, 644, 652, 654, 657, 661, 686–687, 705, 707, 711, 715, 725
- mainstream realism. *See* realism: mainstream
- masochism 36, 137–138, 140, 238, 403–404, 420, 424, 538, 705
- meaning (indirect, higher-order, second-order) 19–20, 62, 83–85, 87–88, 90–91, 94, 100, 104, 106–107, 109, 115, 118, 120, 122, 125–126, 130, 134–135, 146, 171–172, 200, 220, 236–237, 289, 292, 299, 314, 323, 359, 394, 451, 461, 473, 478–479, 484–487, 489–490, 493, 495–499, 521–522, 614, 618–620, 623, 649, 657, 661, 665–666, 674–675, 677, 685, 687–688, 690
- meaning, theories of 63, 68, 98, 108
- media dispositif 78, 106, 617, 688
- media effects 106, 479, 511–512, 516, 538
- media knowledge 19, 78, 114, 174, 203, 205, 215, 348, 455, 458, 513, 536, 621, 673
- mediality 43–44, 135, 174, 217, 338, 501, 674, 695, 745–746
- media psychology 38, 41, 44, 46, 80, 95, 501, 540, 546, 579, 609, 650, 691, 694
- media, specificity of 6, 19, 43, 60, 77–79, 133, 135, 155, 173–174, 200, 202–203, 205–206, 214, 220, 253, 291, 293, 316, 333, 335, 339, 475, 563, 610, 617–618, 634, 676–677, 682, 684, 746
- media studies xix, 17, 26, 41, 47, 54, 70, 83, 94–96, 103, 118, 176, 187, 259–260, 393, 505, 536, 538, 581, 614, 672, 682, 687, 691, 747
- mediation 1, 202, 511, 561, 579
- melodrama 36, 138–139, 204, 244, 246, 253, 287, 315, 317, 382, 396, 405, 409, 434, 438, 440, 445, 459, 469, 497, 506, 533, 543, 577, 589, 597, 616, 632, 648–649, 655, 666, 685, 695
- mental architecture 72, 75, 77, 79, 262
- mental model 19, 21, 38, 55–56, 58, 65–66, 68, 80–89, 91–92, 94, 100, 103, 110, 115, 118–119, 122–123, 125–126, 135, 146, 150, 156–157, 159, 171, 178, 216, 218, 249, 322, 380, 385, 428, 433, 440, 484, 489, 495, 504–505, 536, 552, 563, 592, 594, 596, 598, 601, 614, 619–620, 673–676, 683, 688, 690, 705, 710, 720, 750
- mental modelling 93, 100, 152, 538, 541, 674, 704, 715
- mentor 209, 319, 343, 415, 442, 448, 450, 459, 463, 468
- metamorphosis 144, 281–283, 329
- metaphor 10, 62, 76–77, 81, 83–84, 87–90, 106, 120, 129, 133, 144, 166, 257, 286, 295, 314, 458, 484, 489–491, 494–496, 503, 540, 550, 557, 572, 577, 592, 600, 617–618, 646, 656, 688, 741
- method acting 30, 236, 260, 307, 309, 356, 366
- metonymy 88, 133, 490, 494, 688
- mimesis 13, 17–18, 21, 31–32, 59, 79, 105, 108–109, 120, 126, 163, 227, 295, 306, 348–349, 577, 675
- mind-reading 176, 185, 512
- mindscreen 578–579, 608, 732
- minor character 20, 355, 427, 429–431, 434, 460, 465, 468, 472, 474, 686, 694, 696
- minority group 277, 316, 344, 434–435, 465, 503, 517, 651, 689
- mirror neuron 44, 188–189, 227, 596, 616, 622, 640, 643, 647, 650, 721
- mise-en-scene 121, 139, 154, 242, 296, 301, 312, 314, 319, 377, 382, 454, 458, 572, 577–578, 627, 682, 691, 707

- moderate moralism (N. Carroll) 752
- monster 17, 40, 53, 123, 204, 220, 226, 243–244, 284, 317, 329, 331, 495, 508, 547, 564, 567, 590, 597, 601, 646, 651, 655, 672, 679, 692, 694–697
- mood 82, 85, 154, 174, 185, 187, 194, 208, 231–232, 236, 239, 256, 258, 265, 269, 286, 297, 315, 327, 360, 368, 372, 385, 394, 405, 411, 421, 540, 544, 553, 572, 577, 585, 589, 597, 605, 607, 609, 611–612, 614–615, 617–619, 621, 628, 631, 641, 646, 649–650, 653–654, 659, 661, 663–665, 667–668, 690–693, 705, 720, 727, 732, 735, 740, 745
- morality 25, 41, 47, 85, 359–360, 458, 471, 497, 623, 626, 632, 635, 649, 658–659, 686, 730
- moral quality 27, 29, 32, 53, 61, 230, 242, 432, 633–634, 686, 693
- motivation 4, 20, 66, 74, 85, 109, 131, 137, 150, 164, 185, 187, 189, 194, 196, 208, 242, 256, 258, 266, 268, 271, 275–276, 284–285, 287, 295, 324, 331, 347, 365, 370, 378, 380–381, 385, 388–389, 391–394, 396–404, 406–408, 410–412, 414–415, 417–421, 423–424, 445, 448, 456, 458, 539, 553–554, 590, 607, 612, 626, 639, 681, 684–686, 695, 704, 721, 723, 725–726, 728–729, 739
- levels and types of 393, 396–398, 400, 458
- psychological vs textual 109, 365, 393–394, 396–397, 406
- motivation system 399, 424
- motive 5, 7, 20, 35, 60, 69, 71, 75, 87, 100, 115, 120, 131, 136–137, 139, 147, 157, 163–164, 166–168, 173, 177, 185, 187, 213, 215–216, 231, 239, 243, 245, 253, 256, 266, 272, 276, 279, 287, 292, 294, 302, 314, 332, 349, 351–352, 356, 359, 365, 367, 369, 380–381, 383, 389, 391–394, 396, 398–404, 406–407, 418, 420–422, 424–425, 427, 435, 450, 452–454, 456, 461, 468–469, 485–486, 492, 499, 501, 508, 510, 520, 524, 529, 536, 539, 543, 546, 567, 598, 600, 608, 617, 620, 625–627, 633, 647–648, 653, 657, 666, 672, 684–686, 688, 693–694, 709, 719–722, 727–728, 730, 734, 743, 745
- multidimensionality 20, 43, 57, 66, 107, 118, 121, 143, 145, 150, 184, 198, 207, 209, 216, 220, 248, 272, 291, 337–339, 354, 356–357, 359–361, 364, 366–367, 376, 378, 382, 386, 453, 463–464, 468, 594, 612, 625, 683–684, 690, 694, 697, 712, 714–715, 717–720, 745
- mystery 253, 332, 352, 358, 405, 424, 482, 491, 666, 708, 721, 730
- naming 133, 140, 154, 162, 254, 295, 297, 301–303, 377, 392, 415, 428, 435, 509, 581, 663, 707, 710
- narration 5, 20, 31, 33, 62, 67, 72, 78, 81, 90, 139, 200, 203, 262, 291, 293, 295, 326, 350, 367, 369, 379, 382, 429, 442, 481, 538, 546, 548–550, 556–557, 559–560, 579, 581, 588, 626, 641–642, 645–646, 650, 667, 703, 707, 727, 734, 738, 745
- narrative function 121, 129, 351, 364, 394, 423, 429, 432, 444, 460, 467, 471, 478, 587, 637, 686
- narrative instance 202, 283, 331, 427, 548, 559, 562, 579–582, 585, 588–589, 607
- narrative persuasion 514, 529, 689
- narratology 34, 83, 105, 108, 295, 326, 548, 551–552, 571
- narrator 14, 40, 142–143, 145, 173, 202–203, 291, 295, 318, 326–327, 335, 350, 352, 427, 429, 452, 454, 458, 460–461, 472, 481–482, 537, 548–561, 579–583, 586–591, 597, 606–607, 611, 629, 640, 683, 686, 692, 697
- first-person narrator 203, 318, 326–327, 549, 579–580, 587
- multiple narrators 580
- second-person narrator 580
- third-person narrator 326, 580
- unreliable narrator 580, 683
- we-narrator 580
- need for orientation 575, 650
- need (in motivation) 74, 131, 143, 179, 187, 192, 194, 228, 236, 253, 256, 266, 272, 344, 359, 389, 391–392, 398–404, 406, 408–411, 413–415, 418–419, 421, 423–425, 442, 483, 494, 502, 554, 566, 598, 601, 607, 612, 632–633, 644–646, 648, 653, 655, 666, 668, 685, 696–697, 715, 721, 726, 731
- neuroscience 37, 41, 72, 86, 268, 537, 615, 622, 628, 640, 691
- non-human. *See* being: non-human
- norm 28, 56, 62, 65–66, 68, 77, 97, 102, 110, 137, 139, 141, 162, 179, 181, 191–192, 198, 227–228, 237, 243, 245, 248–249, 251–252, 256, 261, 263–264, 269, 275, 285–287, 332, 339, 341, 346, 362, 365, 367, 370, 378, 398, 404, 406, 414, 419–420, 422, 442, 458, 464, 486, 498, 513, 516, 523, 529, 536, 546–547, 579, 602, 609, 615, 618, 622–623, 625–626, 631–636, 638, 645, 647, 650–651, 655, 658,

- 660–661, 666, 680, 693, 733, 735, 738
- object
 abstract 55, 58, 65, 551, 673
 fictional 55, 57
- object attachment 262, 287
- observational learning. *See* learning:
 observational
- Oedipal character 35, 101–102, 151, 260–261,
 274, 277, 287, 320, 482–483, 487, 525, 616,
 658, 660, 681
- opacity (of characters) 318, 339, 347, 358,
 368–369, 371, 374, 376, 382, 386, 543, 608,
 684, 704, 716
- orchestration (of characters) 433, 436–437,
 439–441, 443, 455
- overacting 349, 352, 354, 384, 627
- paralanguage 238
- parallel character 239, 440–441, 443, 451, 462,
 472
- para-proxemics 593, 599, 605–606, 608, 724,
 731, 733, 736
- parasocial relationship 7, 44, 516, 540, 594,
 601. *See also* interaction: parasocial
- partisanship 631, 722, 733, 736
- PEFiC model 538, 540, 546
- perception
 basal 82, 88–89, 91, 95, 100, 110
 social 41, 80, 173–177, 199, 202–203, 205–
 206, 214, 289, 602
- performance 1, 3, 20, 27–28, 40, 48, 141, 144,
 228, 260, 296–297, 306–309, 311–312, 314,
 334, 371, 374, 384, 394, 430, 456, 621, 635,
 656, 665, 677, 680, 690, 713, 745–746
- person, definition of 178
- Person Model Theory 177
- person schema 38, 170, 179–180, 199, 202, 206,
 214, 283–284, 348, 481
- persona 1, 34, 45, 371, 427, 516, 519, 539, 601,
 672, 700
- persona studies 1, 45
- personalisation 66, 207, 455
- personality 1, 4–7, 12–13, 15, 17, 20, 25–26, 29–
 30, 40, 52, 56–57, 69, 84–85, 101–102, 119–
 121, 124, 126, 131, 133–134, 136, 138, 143,
 150–151, 154, 156, 159–160, 162–166, 168,
 171, 176–178, 180–186, 191–199, 207, 212–
 213, 215, 217, 223, 227, 229–233, 236–239,
 242–244, 252–257, 259, 261–269, 271–273,
 275–278, 280–282, 285–287, 290, 295–297,
 299, 303, 305, 313, 324, 326, 328, 331–333,
 340–342, 346, 349, 352–353, 355–360, 364–
 365, 369–371, 374, 376–378, 380–383, 386,
 389, 391, 398–400, 409, 415–416, 419–421,
 423–425, 435–436, 440, 442–443, 447–448,
 453–454, 461–462, 491–493, 508, 517, 519,
 522, 525, 533, 541, 601, 603, 605, 615, 618,
 620, 625–626, 630, 633, 636, 638, 642–644,
 647, 650, 681, 684–685, 688, 695, 697, 706,
 708, 711–715, 717–720, 722, 730, 733, 737,
 744–745, 750, 752
- personality dimension 134, 191–192, 264,
 275, 443. *See also* Big Five personality traits
- personality inventory 344
- personality theory 176, 181, 185, 191, 193,
 199, 255, 259, 263, 364–365
 implicit personality theory 185, 191, 193,
 199
- personality type 151, 181, 183, 277, 285, 342,
 420, 517, 688
- personification 84, 87, 89, 106, 120, 128, 207,
 359–360, 441, 451, 478, 481, 484, 490, 494,
 496, 499, 513, 522, 621, 657, 688
- perspective
 definition of 553–554, 556, 560
 matrix or system of 559, 561
 mental vs medial 131, 148, 451, 550–561,
 593, 596–597, 600–602, 607, 629, 639, 692–
 693, 697, 732, 734, 739
 types of 554, 588–589
- perspective relations 547, 576, 592–594, 597,
 608, 730
- perspective structure 461, 537, 558, 560–561,
 587–590, 607
- perspectivisation 34, 203, 218, 291, 377, 431–
 432, 451–452, 456, 460, 532, 534, 582, 587–
 591, 597
- perspectivity 217, 338, 351, 532, 547, 562, 592,
 674, 691, 694
- phenomenology 41, 43, 69, 73, 96–99, 104, 111,
 116, 214, 293–294, 299–301, 323, 377, 544–
 545, 550, 615–617, 622, 677, 695, 745, 751
- physicality 53, 163, 213, 216, 220, 227, 240, 242,
 244, 252–253, 275–276, 284, 297, 307, 338,
 341, 361, 377–379, 429, 443, 469, 535, 606,
 620, 623, 643, 679–682, 712, 732, 746. *See also* corporeality
- physiognomy 5, 31, 232, 259, 263, 285, 294,
 296, 360
- plans (in motivation) 131, 156, 166–167, 191,
 213, 246, 269, 271, 348, 391, 398–399, 404,

- 423–424, 427, 446, 495, 554, 578, 590, 597, 613, 658, 683, 685, 712, 721, 723, 729, 735
- plot 3–7, 12, 14, 20, 27–30, 32–33, 42, 83, 90, 109, 131, 138–139, 146–147, 153–154, 163, 167, 197, 204–205, 242, 253, 276, 280–283, 296, 301–302, 307, 309, 315–316, 320, 324–325, 332–333, 335, 339, 342–343, 346, 350, 352–353, 357, 364–368, 374, 380–381, 387–388, 391–392, 394, 400, 404–406, 408, 411, 414–415, 417–418, 421, 424, 427, 429–433, 435, 442, 444–449, 451–455, 460, 467–468, 472, 478, 496–498, 518, 579, 619, 629, 644–645, 649, 651, 653–654, 660, 664, 666, 676, 682–683, 685–687, 699, 711, 713, 716, 719–721, 725–726, 729, 731, 734–736, 747
- definition of 4
- plot function/role 6, 14, 33, 204–205, 367, 430–431, 444–448, 451, 455, 468, 472, 682, 725
- plot vs character 4–6
- point of view 548–549, 551, 556, 560, 572–573, 577, 611, 644, 650, 675, 691, 732, 736, 741
- postcolonialism 40, 144, 466, 479, 602, 651
- postmodernism 294, 370, 373, 378, 386, 695, 697
- post-production 297, 315
- post-structuralism 35, 70, 519
- posture 167, 194, 229, 234, 236, 240, 275, 285–286, 307, 315, 384, 470, 524, 532, 613, 680, 708
- postures 43, 177, 235, 344
- POV editing 319, 572–573, 575–577, 585, 587–589, 591, 600, 608, 664, 692, 733, 737, 746
- power relation 23, 40, 71, 78, 106, 144, 248, 442, 458, 483, 680, 749
- prejudice 2, 22, 176–177, 230, 248, 357, 474, 517–518, 529, 646, 655, 668
- previous history. *See* backstory
- primacy effect 194, 215, 328
- problem-solving 37, 262, 264, 269, 280, 392, 407, 416, 444, 446–448, 626
- production design 297, 352, 704
- projection 36, 74, 131–132, 142, 189, 195, 214, 261, 297, 489, 515, 538, 585, 623, 631, 640, 643, 648–649
- propaganda 2, 128, 130, 146, 178, 436–437, 460, 508, 510, 514, 520, 546, 591, 602–603, 605, 608, 621, 638, 655, 657, 688–689
- properties of characters 109, 115, 132, 337, 521, 688
- protagonist 2, 10, 12, 20, 27, 29, 31, 36, 40, 48, 52, 76, 107, 115, 121, 123, 128–129, 131, 138, 150, 189, 193, 202–205, 208–209, 218, 221, 225, 232, 236–239, 243, 258–259, 277, 279–283, 292, 295, 302–303, 310, 316, 328, 331–333, 339, 341–342, 351, 354, 357, 360–361, 366, 369, 375, 380, 382, 388–389, 391–392, 394, 402, 404–405, 408–411, 414–418, 429, 431–435, 437, 441–442, 446–457, 459–460, 463–474, 478, 482, 486, 493–494, 497–498, 502, 506, 513–514, 533, 539, 543, 545–546, 549, 553, 564, 571, 578–579, 587, 589–590, 594, 597, 600, 602, 605, 607–609, 611, 625, 627, 633–634, 637, 641–644, 646–647, 649–656, 658, 660, 665, 683–684, 686–687, 689–698, 701, 703, 716–717, 725, 731, 733–734, 740, 749, 752
- prototype 75–77, 79, 84, 92, 171, 178–179, 181–183, 189, 193–194, 199, 203, 206–207, 214, 217, 277, 286, 338–340, 361, 489, 708
- proxemics 229, 234, 241, 593, 599, 606, 608, 680, 732, 736
- proximity behaviour 599
- psyche 6, 15–16, 134, 136, 146–147, 150, 159–161, 163–165, 174, 180, 185, 212–213, 216, 220, 223–225, 227–229, 244, 249, 252–263, 266–268, 273–276, 284–285, 287–288, 290, 295, 297, 314, 323, 338, 352, 361, 366, 377–379, 391, 429, 434, 436, 468, 484, 486, 492, 504, 535, 542, 606, 616, 646–647, 650, 672, 676–677, 679, 681–682, 691, 696, 698, 716, 718, 732
- models of 16, 254–261, 273
- psychoanalysis 15–16, 35–37, 39–41, 47, 70, 72, 74, 77, 102–103, 134, 144, 147, 151, 179, 183, 192, 224, 255, 257, 259–263, 266–269, 274, 287, 342, 366, 393, 398, 400, 406, 420, 448, 479, 481, 483, 489, 495, 502, 504, 538, 540, 565, 615–616, 622, 636, 638, 642, 676, 679, 681, 687, 694, 697, 714
- psychological processes 15, 161, 176, 185–186, 190, 220, 253–254, 256, 282, 287, 582, 592, 641
- qualia* 551, 554
- race 40, 46, 141–142, 183, 344, 440–441, 473, 602, 623, 631, 647, 651, 695, 711
- racism 45, 137, 466, 498, 510, 719
- realism 29, 31, 90, 133, 139, 156, 217, 279, 291, 305, 316–317, 325, 347–350, 352–354, 361–363, 365–370, 376, 378, 382, 385–386, 394,

- 420, 429, 434, 444, 451, 460, 468–469, 472, 594, 605, 623, 635, 656, 675, 683–684, 686, 695, 697, 713, 715–716, 720, 745
- independent 362, 367–368, 370, 376, 378, 382, 386, 594, 684, 695, 697, 716, 720, 745
- mainstream 362–363, 365–367, 378, 382, 386, 420, 605, 684, 695, 716, 720, 745
- receiver (Greimas) 444–445, 447–448, 450, 452, 468, 472
- recency effect 194, 215, 328, 333, 431, 627
- reception. *See also* character reception
- empirical 38, 96–97, 99, 101–104, 110, 115, 122, 134, 147, 212, 267, 481, 485, 504, 696
 - ideal 63, 68, 94, 96–99, 101–103, 110–111, 115, 117, 122, 133, 138, 199, 212, 255, 485–486, 492, 504, 696
 - intended 61–63, 96–97, 99, 101–104, 111, 115, 122, 138, 199, 504, 546, 552, 557, 576, 681, 696, 703, 747
 - levels of 80–81, 84, 87–89, 94–95, 101, 110, 119–120, 122, 125, 172, 484–485
- reception theory 44, 68, 70, 79, 95, 100, 267–268
- recognition 21, 36–38, 62, 82, 152, 160, 192, 206, 223, 227, 247, 262, 272–273, 281, 286, 294, 349, 374, 379, 400–401, 408–410, 415, 419, 422, 457, 463, 471, 497, 512, 539, 541, 544–545, 547, 599, 649, 659, 662, 665, 686
- reflection 13, 19, 26, 29, 76, 81–82, 85, 88–90, 92–93, 100, 104, 107, 110–111, 118–119, 121–122, 125–126, 145–147, 172, 254, 269–271, 292, 323, 399, 407, 422, 430, 436, 495–496, 503, 519–520, 532, 553, 614, 619–621, 624, 640, 674, 746
- relations (between characters) 14, 30, 39, 43, 47–48, 130, 313, 326, 427, 429, 435–436, 458, 545, 647
- relationship, social. *See* social relationship
- religion 3, 8, 44, 46, 146, 159, 162, 166, 179, 182, 246, 248, 254, 257–258, 268, 274, 276, 287, 402, 440, 456, 465, 473, 482, 490, 495, 498–499, 515, 529, 623, 626, 647, 651, 657, 671–672, 680, 687, 689–690, 695
- representation
- form of 34, 78, 201, 300, 325, 348, 352, 364, 377, 458
 - level of 209, 296–297, 300, 305, 308, 316, 325, 481, 716
 - means of 79, 110, 126, 133, 296, 320, 578, 656, 677, 711
 - mode of 109, 129, 139, 314, 352, 374, 382, 434, 444, 550, 556, 682, 696
- representationalism 72–73
- representational perspective 556–558, 561
- representational structure 133, 427
- representation, mental 56–58, 64–68, 70, 72–73, 77, 79–81, 83–86, 98, 114, 120, 152, 155–160, 167–168, 170–172, 174, 176, 182–183, 192, 200, 205, 211, 213–214, 216, 218, 220, 224, 226, 257, 287, 305, 316, 331, 339–340, 349, 353, 428, 489, 493, 505, 550–551, 560, 624, 672–673, 683
- representation, semiotic 2–3, 11, 14–16, 18, 32, 34–35, 39–41, 58–59, 70, 72, 93, 104, 111, 114, 154, 157, 175, 200, 255, 257, 278, 317, 340–341, 343, 456, 497, 501, 556–557, 559, 673, 676, 682
- representation, social 45, 245, 248–249, 275, 286, 503, 538
- rhetoric 1–2, 20, 27, 88, 107, 141, 143–145, 160, 290, 297, 374, 393, 505, 682–683
- rhythm 73, 78–80, 119, 228, 233, 235–236, 238, 253, 283, 286, 290, 293, 297, 299, 317, 321–322, 334, 351–352, 377, 583, 585, 600, 606, 623, 707
- ritual 77, 351, 528–529, 689
- role, actantial. *See* actant role
- role biography 171, 371–372, 519, 709, 745
- role conflict 248
- role distance 248, 308, 374
- role model 2, 118, 123, 305, 422, 478, 514–515, 533, 621, 631, 659, 666
- role (of an actor) 30, 53, 67, 87, 171, 214, 231, 251, 341, 354, 371–372, 430, 433, 442, 509, 528, 581, 627, 703, 721, 746, 749
- role set 248, 251, 378, 469
- role, social. *See* social role
- sadism 36, 194–195, 274, 399, 403–404, 406, 424, 508, 525, 538, 549, 558, 598, 624, 626, 634, 638, 658, 701, 715, 719, 725, 737, 740, 743–744
- schema
- affective or emotional 623, 628, 632, 648, 653
 - mental 72, 80, 84, 89, 181, 195, 223, 278, 340, 481, 489, 599, 705
- screenplay 129, 296–297, 391, 408, 524, 552, 579, 650, 701
- screenwriting 5, 20, 27, 36, 39, 150–151, 160,

- 208, 236, 250, 261, 279, 281, 331, 342, 355, 365, 392, 399, 408, 412, 420, 432, 438, 444, 446–448, 494, 497, 598, 602, 685
- script 2–3, 8–9, 67, 74–75, 129, 131, 150, 160, 296, 311, 317, 342, 357, 415, 447, 525, 585, 622, 661, 666, 709
- secondary character 151, 208, 216, 248, 282, 316, 328, 332, 342, 346, 376, 393, 427, 429–431, 433, 435, 441, 452, 460, 463–464, 467, 472, 474, 642, 650–651, 654, 686–687
- self-model 157, 213–215, 218, 550–551, 569, 594, 673
- semiotics 17, 32, 37, 41, 47, 71–72, 74–75, 99, 200, 257, 294. *See also* representation, semiotic
- sender (Greimas) 33, 444–445, 447–448
- sensation 69, 82–83, 119, 151, 182, 187, 213, 253, 256, 277, 317, 374, 403, 486, 532, 551, 553, 568, 577, 591, 607, 612–616, 618, 623, 627, 639–640, 650, 661, 667, 705
- sensuality. *See* character: sensuality of
- sex role. *See* Bem Sex Role Inventory
- sexuality 40, 77, 168, 228, 263, 265, 285, 481, 483, 516–517, 712
- sexual orientation 8–9, 37, 183, 344, 473, 602, 647, 651, 666, 693
- shadow 343, 448, 450, 468, 651, 771
- shapeshifter 448, 451, 468–469
- sidekick 446–447, 450–451, 468
- sign system 297, 306, 325, 335, 351–352, 377
- similarity (between characters, audiences) 44, 60, 69, 131, 152, 174–175, 189, 215, 303, 322, 366, 377, 421, 427, 429, 433–437, 440–441, 443, 448, 482, 496, 540, 545, 559–561, 576, 593, 602, 604, 620, 681, 686–688, 703, 714, 719, 731
- similarity identification 603, 642–643, 645, 651–652
- simulation 80, 156, 175, 187–189, 195, 214, 255, 512, 537–538, 542, 555, 559, 561, 568, 592, 596, 598, 609, 625, 631, 639–641, 668, 721, 723
- Simulation Theory 177, 568
- situation model 67, 80–81, 83, 90, 119, 157, 673
- social comparison 131, 601–603, 636, 649, 651, 693
- social group 3, 8–9, 14, 39–40, 45–46, 62, 94, 131, 133, 162, 167–168, 181–184, 199, 206, 214, 227, 246–247, 250, 286, 310, 341–344, 349, 422, 442, 457, 465–466, 471, 473–475, 480, 495–496, 508, 602, 605, 609, 615, 633, 638, 671, 685, 687–689
- sociality 20, 53, 146–147, 159, 163–165, 174, 180, 184, 212–213, 216, 220, 223–225, 227–229, 231–232, 236, 242, 244–245, 250, 252–253, 271, 275–276, 284–286, 288, 290, 295, 297, 313–314, 323, 338, 340, 349, 361, 377–379, 391, 429, 436, 484, 535, 606, 620, 643, 646–647, 650, 675, 677, 679–682, 691, 695, 697, 710, 732
- social position 28, 164–166, 194, 212–213, 245, 247, 275, 286, 290, 299, 412, 443, 538, 681, 691
- social relationship 86, 136, 151, 163, 180, 182, 245–247, 250, 252, 262, 286, 326, 330, 380, 402–403, 424, 429, 471, 473, 514, 516, 519, 529, 625, 709
- social role 1, 13, 100, 136, 182–183, 207, 230, 237, 243, 248, 251, 277, 283, 285, 308, 341, 398–399, 416–417, 419, 421, 443, 461, 464, 466, 495, 498–499, 505, 519, 547, 599, 602–606, 622, 638, 642, 645, 680, 710, 715, 719, 721, 737
- social status 28, 137, 154, 165, 171, 194, 242, 417, 432, 434–435, 438, 441, 469, 474, 605, 647, 689, 706, 711, 721
- social structure 36, 161, 213, 244, 246, 374–376, 466, 510, 626
- social system 147, 245, 247, 252, 275, 286, 387, 389, 455, 457, 461, 473, 510, 686
- sound 6, 10, 12, 48, 56, 58, 61, 73, 79–82, 85–86, 88, 90–91, 110, 114, 119, 127, 133, 135, 140–144, 154, 156, 170, 175, 201, 205, 225, 231, 238, 253, 290–291, 293–299, 301, 306, 312, 314–316, 319–320, 322–323, 325, 334, 337–338, 348, 351, 377, 382–383, 430, 435, 475, 481, 537, 544, 553–554, 563, 565, 567, 570–572, 575, 577, 579, 581–585, 587–589, 591, 597, 600, 608, 614, 618–621, 623, 627–628, 631, 641–642, 645, 661, 674, 677, 682, 699, 704, 710, 720, 723, 732
- space for action 239
- space for perception 239
- space, perceptual and experiential 239
- space, symbolic 240, 482
- spatial closeness 110, 600
- staging 34, 139, 154, 297, 303, 310–312, 316, 322, 334, 352, 380, 384, 429, 469–470, 475, 528, 666, 682, 704, 712, 722
- star image 7, 10, 34, 67, 90, 154, 203, 214, 218, 238, 294, 296–297, 303, 305–306, 331, 341–342, 372, 377, 381, 384, 430, 563, 606, 627, 659, 665–666, 684, 705, 709–711, 722,

- 745–747
- status, social. *See* social status
- stereotype 8, 10, 20, 39–41, 47–48, 59–60, 71, 74, 76, 125, 127, 133, 139, 151, 168, 171, 174, 178, 181, 183–184, 189, 199, 203, 206–207, 209, 214–217, 220, 230, 234, 248, 250, 277, 286, 292, 310–311, 316, 337–338, 341–346, 355, 371–373, 376, 385, 394, 435, 440, 463, 465–466, 468–469, 471–472, 474–475, 509–511, 516–518, 520, 529, 538, 585, 602–603, 633, 637–638, 649, 655, 658, 662, 668, 676, 681, 683, 687, 689–690, 697–698, 709–710, 712, 717–718, 742, 745, 749
- stereotypicality 337, 699
- storyworld 21, 23, 45, 51, 66, 81, 84–85, 88, 90, 108, 120, 125, 130, 133, 136, 143, 147, 150, 153, 159, 240, 290, 324, 339, 388, 393, 416–417, 429, 431–432, 434, 444, 461, 478, 481–482, 485, 489, 498, 548, 558, 581, 592, 619–620, 624, 627, 629–630, 634, 650, 656, 660–661, 665–666, 674–676, 679, 682–683, 685, 687, 691–694. *See also* world, represented or fictional
- structuralism 4–5, 15, 31–35, 40, 52, 55, 65, 70, 134, 437, 440, 444, 519, 687
- structure, social. *See* social structure
- stylisation 139, 142, 178, 244, 278, 301, 308–309, 317, 334, 342, 347, 349, 353–354, 361–362, 371–376, 385, 674, 707, 715–716
- subjectivisation 577–578
- subjectivity 34, 157, 358, 513, 552, 555, 560, 572, 577, 579, 591, 608
- subtext 237, 286, 379, 470, 494, 711, 713
- superhero 46, 48, 452, 457, 459–460, 489, 649
- superiority 241, 372, 448, 589–590, 603, 636, 661, 667
- surprise 74, 139, 193–194, 233, 251, 291, 324, 328, 330, 333, 357, 377, 405, 417, 433, 448, 451, 533, 538, 592, 619, 653–654, 656, 667–668, 683, 685, 724, 735, 745–746
- suspense 83, 168, 291, 315, 324, 328, 331, 377, 380–381, 392, 402, 405, 407, 423, 433, 443, 448, 451, 468, 538, 540, 544, 553, 558, 576, 591–592, 616, 619, 653–654, 657–658, 663–665, 668, 683–685, 690, 721–722, 724, 735–736, 746
- symbol 19–21, 43, 81, 83–84, 87–90, 105–111, 118, 120, 123, 125–126, 129–133, 135, 139, 141, 143, 145–150, 159, 172, 200, 211–212, 227, 231, 241, 244, 253, 258, 261, 283, 286, 289, 292, 295, 302, 309, 314, 323, 359–360, 362, 372, 377, 388–389, 394, 447, 461, 471, 473, 478–481, 484–485, 487, 489–490, 493–494, 496, 498–499, 501–502, 504, 507, 510, 513, 519–524, 529, 531–532, 534, 545–546, 553, 594, 610, 618, 620–621, 624, 649, 657, 661, 665–666, 676–677, 679, 684–685, 687–690, 694–697, 699, 703–704, 737, 744, 747–749, 752
- definition of 106
- symbolism 8, 69, 106, 108, 128, 135, 144, 172, 294, 354, 359–361, 464, 471, 489–490, 496, 499, 501, 521–522, 530, 666, 688, 694, 698, 728
- sympathy 7, 21, 69, 83, 85, 88, 131, 153, 167, 172, 250, 270–271, 325, 330, 361, 372, 384, 402–403, 405, 411, 437, 462–463, 473, 532, 538, 540–541, 543–544, 568, 590, 597, 600–602, 614, 616, 620, 623, 631–632, 636, 639, 644–645, 648–656, 659–661, 664, 667–668, 690, 692–693, 697, 721–722, 724, 728–730, 733–734, 747
- symptom 19–21, 36, 80, 82, 88, 95, 105, 107–111, 118, 120–121, 125–126, 128–134, 138, 140–141, 145–146, 149–150, 153, 178, 200, 211–212, 218, 244, 289, 292, 299, 354, 362, 372, 388–389, 395, 423, 431, 434, 461, 471, 473, 478–487, 499, 501–504, 506–509, 513, 520–522, 524, 528–529, 531–532, 534, 545–546, 553, 594, 610, 621, 624, 649, 656–657, 662, 665, 676–677, 679, 684–685, 687–690, 694–696, 698–699, 703–704, 747–749, 752–753
- definition of 106
- symptomatology 135, 464, 471, 499, 501, 521–522, 530, 688, 698, 747
- synchronisation 598, 600, 606, 608, 612, 691
- taboo 168, 227–228, 285, 441, 495, 498, 533, 546, 567, 578, 634, 647, 743
- target object 445, 451–452, 472, 686
- temperament 151, 162, 185, 191, 272–273, 276–277, 287, 441, 490
- text, definition of 2
- thematics 83, 493
- theme 2, 7, 13, 15, 19–20, 28–32, 34, 78, 81, 83–84, 89–90, 92, 101, 106, 108–109, 125, 127, 130–131, 135, 140, 143, 148, 150, 160, 163, 167–168, 172, 192–193, 220, 226, 242–245, 248, 253, 279, 283, 286, 292, 301–302, 304, 325, 328, 350, 359, 369, 388–389, 394, 402, 406, 411, 418, 421, 423, 431, 433–434, 438, 442–443, 446–447, 453, 463, 480, 482–483, 490, 493–494, 497, 499, 505, 518, 521, 523–524, 553, 614, 618–621, 623, 626, 662, 665–666, 675, 685, 687–688, 704, 735, 743,

- 747, 752
- theory of meaning. *See* meaning, theories of
- Theory of Mind 176–178, 185, 255
- theory of personality. *See* personality: personality theory
- Theory Theory (of social cognition) 177, 568
- threshold guardian 343, 448, 450
- touch behaviour 78, 88, 187, 431, 569, 705
- trait. *See also* character trait
- physical or corporeal 160–161, 168, 184, 198, 218, 276–279, 281, 295, 340–341, 346, 348–349, 391, 435, 464, 472, 646, 659, 666, 716
 - psychological or mental 43, 119, 143, 150, 160–161, 164–165, 168, 184–185, 191, 193, 198–199, 218, 227, 240, 254, 256, 262, 266–267, 275–279, 295, 299, 340–341, 346, 348–349, 391, 435, 464, 469, 472, 566, 625, 659, 666, 708, 716
 - social 43, 160–164, 168, 176, 184–185, 199, 218, 227, 240, 244, 253, 276–279, 295, 299, 302, 330, 340–341, 346, 348–349, 353, 391, 435, 444, 469, 472, 478, 507, 596, 646, 659, 666, 693, 716
- trait system 220, 278, 291, 338–340, 354–355, 357–358, 362, 364–365, 373, 434, 436
- transference 34, 36, 83, 260–261, 303, 484, 536, 538–539, 567, 616, 657. *See also* information distribution
- transformation 106, 143, 201–202, 208, 262, 278–284, 291, 329, 333, 341, 416, 443, 508, 514, 684, 697, 724, 749
- transmediality 43–44, 182, 203, 518, 528, 676, 696
- transparency (of characters) 354, 361, 365, 371, 376, 378, 434, 683
- transportation 83, 90
- trickster 448, 451, 468–469, 543, 647
- typecasting 342, 436
- types (of character). *See* character types
- typification 127, 147, 191, 207–209, 217–218, 231, 285, 291, 302, 330, 339–343, 346–348, 354, 359–361, 363, 365, 372, 374, 376, 378, 382, 385, 429, 431, 434, 453, 460, 463–464, 472, 474, 563, 594, 596, 623, 683, 695, 697, 708, 710, 715
- typology 14–15, 27, 31, 33, 41, 48, 183, 203–204, 207, 261, 277–278, 309, 342, 346, 362, 376, 400, 402–403, 405, 420–421, 432, 444, 452, 497, 523, 538, 588, 592, 650, 695
- underacting 307–308, 310, 352, 384, 715
- values, spectrum of 277, 459, 473, 635
- value structure 458–461, 469, 473, 667, 686
- value system 131, 147, 251, 253, 276, 283, 285, 361, 389, 427, 494, 634–635, 655, 667
- veneration 510, 515–516, 690
- video game 3, 43–44
- voyeurism 36, 483, 538, 625, 638, 658, 728
- want (in motivation) 399, 414–415, 685
- war film 244, 282, 402, 436–437, 465, 604, 648, 652, 655–656
- Westerns 14, 52, 324, 333, 340, 364, 402, 404, 414, 463, 465, 525, 604, 634, 655
- wish fulfilment 513, 529, 616, 643, 647, 656
- vicarious 513, 529, 616, 643, 656
- wishful identification. *See* identification: wishful
- wish (in motivation) 83, 137, 178, 187, 191, 196, 228, 256, 284, 288, 332, 366, 391–393, 398–401, 403–405, 410, 419, 422–424, 441, 461, 495, 513, 554, 556–558, 564, 567, 569–571, 582, 585, 588–590, 592, 597, 605, 607, 614, 625, 639, 641, 643, 659, 685, 721–722, 740
- world, represented or fictional 41, 51, 54–55, 66–67, 80–85, 88–89, 94–95, 105, 108–109, 120, 127, 138, 159, 168, 173, 175, 187, 200–201, 203, 211, 218, 220, 245, 259, 263, 266, 269, 289–290, 300, 302, 306, 317, 324, 329, 335, 338, 348–350, 352, 354, 371, 378, 394, 404, 481, 538, 548, 551–552, 555, 561, 582, 587, 614, 619, 672. *See also* diegesis

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Alessandra Tosi was the managing editor for this book.

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Jeremy Bowman typeset the book in InDesign and produced the paperback and hardback editions and created the EPUB. The main text font is Tex Gyre Pagella and the heading font is Californian FB. Jeremy also produced the PDF edition.

The conversion to the HTML edition was performed with epublius, an open-source software which is freely available on our GitHub page at <https://github.com/OpenBookPublishers>

Laura Rodríguez was in charge of marketing.

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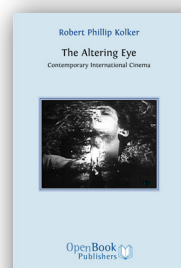


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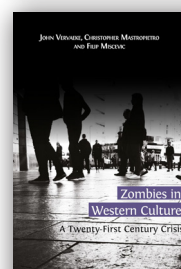


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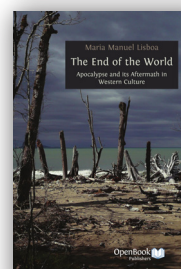


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